SEPTEMBER 2015
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46 PRODUCTS REVIEWED!

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TESTS

- Automatic espresso machines
- Dual SIM smartphones
- Portable air conditioners
- Laundry balls
- Dual fuel ranges
- Tablets
- Honda HRV

LEATHER RACKET

Is your luxury lounge the real deal?

NOISE CANCELLING

Hit the snooze button on snoring

Back in black

Taking 21st century turntables for a spin

Without fear or favour

We'll continue to stand our ground when consumer interests are at stake – even in the face of legal threats

One of my favourite regular jobs is to welcome CHOICE members to our building when they come to tour our testing labs. For me, this is a chance to meet some of the people who pay our wages. For members, it's a chance to ask the questions they have always wanted to ask.

The discussion tends to roam far and wide, but there's one question that always comes up:

"Does CHOICE have a large legal department?" It's a fair question. We take on some pretty big targets. Just looking at the Shonky Award winners from the past few years, they have included major banks, international electronics manufacturers and, in 2011, the entire Australian insurance industry. In the normal course of our work, we encounter plenty of threats of legal action – some explicit, others thinly veiled.

Earlier this year, a legal firm acting for Advanced Hair Studio contacted us demanding that we remove comments about Advanced Hair from a story on hair loss treatment. They took issue with the way we reported on action by British advertising regulators about misleading ads featuring Shane Warne.

While we updated the story, there was no way we were going to leave consumers in the dark about Advanced Hair, so you can still read it on the CHOICE website. (Our tip: you should be highly sceptical about any product that claims to reverse hair loss!)

Earlier this year, Pace Farms sent the lawyers in after we named them as one of the worst offenders for shonky "free range" egg claims. Once again, we stuck to our guns.

Other businesses resort to a PR assault – like in June, when the big retailers sent out former David Jones CEO Mark McInnes to attack us over our campaign against changes to the GST on overseas online purchases. The strength of this response told us that we must have been doing something right.

We are, of course, meticulous with our research and fact checking. We don't want to unfairly damage the reputation of any business – and, more importantly, we want to make sure that we're giving accurate advice to consumers. If somebody finds an error in our work, we're happy to correct it.

But the reality is that most of the heavy-handed letters we receive – be they from lawyers or PR hacks – are simply trying to scare us into silence. They usually achieve the opposite effect, because if anything, they tell us that we're onto something – that we have found the weak point in a business's product or marketing claims.

And if one of these matters turns into a public brawl, all the better. I'd be happy to stake the reputation of CHOICE against Advanced Hair any day.

Alan Kirkland, CEO
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For general membership and consumer enquiries, phone 1800 069 552

CHOICE

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When should you chuck the Chux? Find out on p19

NEXT MONTH **SPECIAL SHONKYS EDITION**
See October delivery update on p74

Bali ash cloud

Indonesia's Mount Ruang has been in full swing in recent months, and its ash cloud has caused Jetstar and Virgin to cancel flights in and out of Bali. So if your flight was delayed or cancelled and you're out of pocket, where do you stand?

- Jetstar advises customers to contact them within 28 days of their original flight date; for Virgin, it's 30 days. Some customers can re-book their flights, or claim a refund for the cost.

Most, but not all, comprehensive travel insurance policies cover flight cancellation expenses due to a natural disaster (such as an ash cloud). Many policies will also cover you for reasonable additional accommodation and meal expenses if you were delayed in Bali. And by reasonable, they mean if you were staying in a villa in Canggu, don't try upgrading to a Nusa Dua penthouse at their expense.

But – and it's an important but – most policies will exclude cover for the ash cloud if you bought your travel insurance after it became a known event in the media. Insurers such as Travel Insurance Direct state the cut-off date as 2 July – if you bought insurance after this date, you're not covered.

So check with your insurer if they'll cover you. If you're not satisfied with their response you can lodge a complaint via their internal dispute resolution, and if that doesn't resolve your grievances, contact the Financial Ombudsman Service.

JODI BIRD AND BRENT SAVAGE

Software holding you for ransom?

A new type of ransomware that takes hold of a user's computer then demands payment to relinquish control is working its way through desktops and laptops across Australia. The virus is reportedly unbreakable; a similar bug was recently found on Android devices.

Australians continue to install ransomware inadvertently by downloading software from untrusted websites or following links in emails that appear to come from legitimate sources. Malware and ransomware schemes have cost Australians over $376,000 from January to July this year. The only good news is that the total cost of these attacks has fallen compared to the same period in 2014. By this time last year, Australians had lost nearly $420,000 to these scams.

Australia was the second-most targeted country (after the US) for ransomware campaigns during the first three months of 2015, according to a report from security software company Trend Micro. It also noted that the number of ransomware infections on consumer systems had dropped from 72% to 52%, while attacks on small business had increased from 16% to 28%. Some experts attribute this to the low Aussie dollar, which makes us a profitable prospect for cyber-criminals.

PETER ZALUZNY

Sugar, by any other name

As the Australian government considers recommendations to improve labelling of added sugars in ingredient lists, the US government's Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has proposed including a percentage-of-daily-intake value for added sugars in the nutrition information panel (NIP).

This follows the recommendation from the World Health Organization that we limit our intake of 'free' or added sugars to no more than 10% of our total energy intake, in order to reduce our risk of overweight, obesity and tooth decay.

Here in Australia, the total amount of sugars in a product is listed in the NIP, but it doesn't differentiate sugars that have been added by the manufacturer (including honey, syrups and fruit juices) from those that are intrinsic to the food (such as lactose in milk).

Currently the only way to tell that sugars have been added is by checking the ingredients list – the higher up the list, the more sugar the product contains.

But when added sugars can hide behind 40+ different names (see 'Sugar coating', below) you may still be none the wiser.

One of the key recommendations to come out of the government's 2011 food labelling review was that where sugars are added as separate ingredients in a food, the term 'added sugars' be used in the ingredient list as the generic term, followed by a bracketed list with further details. For example: added sugars (fructose, glucose syrup, honey).

While it's not as strong as the FDA's proposal, we think it's at least a step in the right direction towards helping consumers make informed choices about the foods they buy.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand is currently providing technical advice to ministers on this recommendation, and it will be voted on soon.

Do you agree that added sugars should be identified on ingredients lists? If so, you can join our campaign at **choice.good.do/sugar.**

RACHEL CLEMONS

SUGAR COATING

42 DIFFERENT NAMES FOR 'ADDED SUGAR'

1. AGAVE NECTAR/SYRUP
2. BARLEY MALT
3. BEET SUGAR
4. BLACKSTRAP MOLASSES
5. BROWN SUGAR
6. CANE SUGAR
7. CAROB SYRUP
8. CASTER SUGAR
9. COCONUT SUGAR
10. COFFEE SUGAR CRYSTALS
11. CONFECTIONER'S SUGAR
12. CORN SYRUP
13. DATE SUGAR/SYRUP
14. DEMERARA
15. DEXTROSE
16. EVAPORATED CANE JUICE
17. FRUCTOSE
18. FRUIT JUICE
19. FRUIT JUICE CONCENTRATE
20. GLUCOSE
21. GOLDEN SYRUP
22. GRAPE SUGAR/SYRUP
23. HONEY
24. ICING SUGAR
25. INVERT SUGAR
26. LACTOSE
27. MALT
28. WHITE SUGAR
29. MALTOSE
30. MAPLE SYRUP
31. MOLASSES
32. MUSCOVADO
33. PALM SUGAR
34. PANELA
35. POWDERED SUGAR
36. RAPADURA
37. RAW SUGAR
38. RICE SYRUP
39. SUCROSE
40. TREACLE
41. TURBINADO
42. HIGH-FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP

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IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Charities miss reporting deadline

More than 4000 state-registered charities are in trouble for failing to report to the federal government's new Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

Registered charities are meant to report to the ACNC every financial year, allowing the public access to detailed information about the charity: what it's about, where it's located, and its registration history.

"The Charity Register is designed to promote public trust and confidence in charities, by increasing the transparency of the information available about charities," said a Commission spokesperson.

The tardy charities will now have a 'red mark' on the register, which indicates that it was six months or more late in making the information available, highlighting to the public, donors, and grant makers that the charity has not committed to the government's effort to better regulate the sector. There are currently 38,000 charities who have submitted their reports to the ACNC on time.

But the red mark only means so much, since registering is voluntary. So if you have any doubts about a charity asking for money, you should also check with your state or territory fundraising regulator. The ACNC has a fact sheet to help you make sure your donation ends up where you intended.

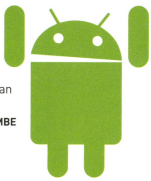
NATASHA PATCH

Cyber bug puts Android users at risk

Android-based mobile devices are under threat from yet another major security vulnerability called Certifi-gate. This time a simple download patch won't fix it; making phones and tablets safe against the bug will reportedly require a rewrite of the underlying software, leaving most mobile devices vulnerable until a new operating system version is released.

The weakness could allow criminals to take control of Android devices and gain access to sensitive data. It was discovered by security vendor Check Point Software, which released details of the issue at a recent conference in Las Vegas. The company says Certifi-gate could put hundreds of millions of Android devices at risk.

Check Point Software has released a free app to scan for the Certifi-gate vulnerability, which you can download from the Google Play store. **STEVE DUNCOMBE**



To upgrade, or not to upgrade?

Windows 10 is here. But should you upgrade? When Windows 8 launched it was geared towards a future based in tablets and touchscreens, but public response was mixed due to drastic changes in the look and feel, which left some users confused. Many refused to upgrade. Microsoft seems to have taken the feedback on board, because Windows 10 delivers the freedom of choice its predecessor struggled to provide.

Most Windows 7 and 8.1 users have a whole year to grab Windows 10 before the free upgrade expires, so it's probably worth waiting a month or two before you download the new OS. Although Windows 10 has been through a massive public beta test, problems ranging from quirks to major bugs are likely to rear their heads now that it's available to everyone. Most of these will probably be ironed out in the coming months, so it's worth waiting for Microsoft to finish the initial rollout.

On top of this, the list of programs that are incompatible with Windows 10 may increase, and if this includes one or more that you regularly use, you may want to look for an alternative before upgrading your software.

PETER ZALUZNY

Stopping the spin-cycle

As part of an awareness campaign earlier this month, CHOICE crushed two Samsung washing machines to pieces to ensure they no longer posed a danger to consumers.

The stunt was designed to highlight an ongoing fault with the wiring of six Samsung top loader models that has caused over 200 fires and fire-related incidents in Australian homes. Samsung issued a voluntary recall of the machines in April 2013, but at the beginning of August 2015 only 51% of the machines had been repaired or replaced.

"With 207 fires or incidents across Australia caused by Samsung's recalled washing machines, we felt it was time to crush the spin cycle and get the message through to consumers that they need to act," said CHOICE head of media Tom Godfrey.

The consequences of Samsung's faulty washing machines are very real. Earlier this year, Emma Jordan's newly built house was badly damaged when her Samsung washing machine caught fire. Prior to the incident, she hadn't heard anything about the recall. And with over 70,000 machines still in homes, the danger remains if the machines are not repaired. So why isn't Samsung doing more to alert its customers about the recall?

Samsung has run a recall campaign across print, online and radio. However, it stopped short of a TV advert – an advertising medium it hasn't been shy about using to promote its products.

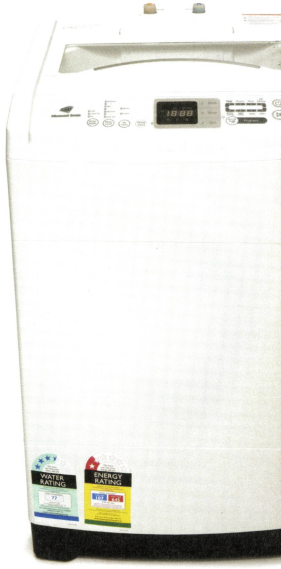
As part of the awareness-raising campaign, CHOICE is also running a crowdfunding campaign to produce a TV ad to alert consumers about the danger. You can get on board at **choice.good.do/endspin**.

We think the business responsible for putting the dodgy products on the market should be doing all they possibly can to protect the public following their failure. Recalls should not be about notices that look more like polished marketing collateral than a serious public warning. CHOICE welcomes NSW Fair Trading's recent decision to make the recall mandatory.

If you have one of the affected models, you should contact Samsung. The models affected were manufactured from 2010 to 2013.

SW75V9WIP	SW65V9WIP
SW70SPWIP	SW80SPWIP
WA85GWGIP	WA85GWWIP

KARINA BRAY



ACCC ramps up recall in wake of dodgy cables

The ACCC is warning consumers about the dangers of Infinity cables, which could result in electric shock or house fires in 2016 if not made safe.

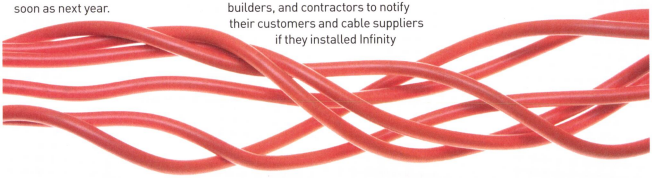
The cables were recalled last year after they failed to meet safety standards due to poor quality plastic insulation coating, which is expected to become prematurely brittle as soon as next year.

Around 3900km of unsafe cable was supplied and approximately 70% of it is still unaccounted for. As a result, the ACCC is holding an Infinity Regulatory Task Force meeting with relevant regulators to discuss how businesses can alert consumers to the recall and remediation options.

"The ACCC is urging electricians, builders, and contractors to notify their customers and cable suppliers if they installed Infinity cables between 2010 and 2013," said ACCC deputy chair Delia Rickard.

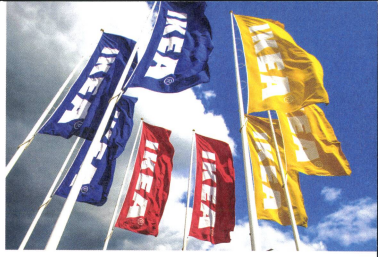
If you've bought a new property, undertaken renovations, or had appliances installed or electrical work carried out in that period, you should contact a licensed electrician for a safety inspection to determine if Infinity cables were installed.

NATASHA PATCH



IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Falling furniture



Ikea has launched a safety awareness campaign to prevent 'tip-over incidents', following two child deaths involving its Malm chest of drawers.

In 2014, two boys under the age of two in the US were killed after the chest of drawers fell on them; neither had been properly secured. The chests are intended to be attached to the wall with restraints provided in the packaging, according to the furniture retailer.

"Product safety is the highest priority for Ikea, and Ikea chests and dressers are safe when attached to the wall, as directed in the assembly instructions," an Ikea spokesperson said in a statement.

Australian customers who have misplaced the tip-over restraints included with their Malm chests can pick up a free wall anchoring kit in store or online.

There are, however, concerns that affixing furniture to walls isn't an option for renters. Ned Cutcher from Tenants Union of NSW said renters do need landlord permission, but that landlords can't unreasonably refuse: "If there's a dispute about whether or not a request is reasonable or not, tenants can apply to the tribunal."

NATASHA PATCH

Rescuing orphaned content

Muffins, cakes and biscuits became the unlikely foot soldiers in the push for copyright reform in Australia, as part of the Freedom of Access to Information and Resources group's (FAIR) Cooking For Copyright campaign.

The Australian Copyright Act was passed in 1968, so it isn't exactly up to date when it comes to new technology and how we share information online. Although the Act has been updated here and there over the years, there are plenty of oversights that can see people breaking the law with no idea they've done anything wrong.

According to FAIR, some of the more extreme examples are:

- A teacher can write a poem on a blackboard for free, but if they wrote it on an electronic whiteboard they'd have to pay a copyright fee.
- You can record a TV program to watch later, but you can't legally watch and record the show at the same time.
- Libraries can make a copy of a work for preservation purposes, but only after it has been lost, stolen or damaged.

While Australian copyright lasts for 70 years after the death of the person who created the copyrighted work, when it comes to unpublished works (even something as simple as Nanna's favourite cake recipe) the copyright lasts forever.

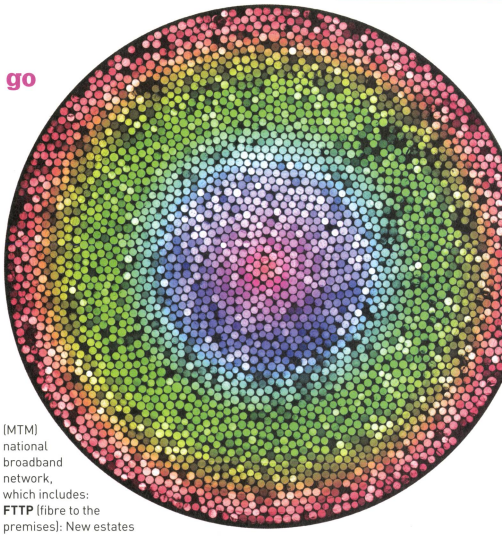
What this means is old diaries, letters, company records, and even recipes cannot be digitised and shared under the current law, despite their value socially and historically.

CHOICE policy and campaigns advisor Sarah Agar said the outdated laws can also have a negative impact on historical documents, such as diaries and letters from soldiers at war.

"These are culturally important records that can tell us a lot about our history – but if the letter-writer has passed away and you can't find their family to get permission to share it, it will be under copyright forever. Copyright should protect creators, encouraging them to publish new works – but here, the system has failed. Publishing the document could only be a good thing, but our archaic copyright law says that it wouldn't be legal."

KATE BROWNE

NBN rollout: still a long way to go



The rollout of the NBN continues after the government's many reviews and a significant network redesign. So just what's been happening?

As of July this year, there were 508,000 premises connected to the NBN service, but many more will have access to it sometime soon, with the government announcing that the NBN had 'passed' more than a million premises, including fibre, fixed wireless and satellite services, as of June this year. The government plans to have eight million premises connected by 2020.

Meanwhile, NBN Co, the group charged with delivering the NBN, recently rebranded to 'nbn™' and has spent around $4.5 million advertising the new brand to consumers this year.

WHEN WILL I GET THE NBN?

There's a rollout map at nbnco.com.au where you can check your address and register to be notified when the NBN is due in your street.

If your place is listed as 'service available', you'll be able to access the NBN. However, if it's 'underway', there'll be a bit of wait while that section of the network is constructed. And if it's 'not available', then you've no clue as to when your premises will be on the rollout plan.

Once the NBN is in your area, you have 18 months to move to the new network. If you're on an existing contract, you may pay a penalty to end that contract and take an NBN service with another ISP. If you stay with the same ISP, it's most likely treated as an upgrade and there should be no penalty. If in doubt, check with the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman about your rights.

WHAT WILL I GET?

It depends. The government is building a 'multi-technology mix' (MTM) national broadband network, which includes:

FTTP (fibre to the premises): New estates and developments are likely to get this.

FTTN (fibre to the node): Areas with existing ADSL and cable services are likely to be upgraded and connected to fibre at a nearby node. The first FTTN services are expected to launch this month.

FTTB (fibre to the basement) services for office blocks and apartments were launched this year with one million homes and businesses scheduled to get FTTB services.

Fixed wireless: Uses cellular, or mobile, technology to connect homes and businesses with an antenna to a nearby wireless facility in areas that don't have a fixed line to connect to the internet.

Satellite: Uses a satellite dish on the premises to receive the internet through a satellite from a ground transmitter in remote areas.

THE FUTURE OF THE NBN?

The all-fibre network originally planned will not be built in the foreseeable future. Nbn™ is tasked with finding upgrades 'as necessary', which would likely be after the projected end date of 2020, and there's no future upgrade plan as yet.

Telecommunications expert Paul Budde is critical of the current plan and says that by 2020, Australia will be about 10 years behind countries with similar networks. Furthermore, he says countries building all-fibre networks are starting now and Australia lacks a plan for an upgraded path to an all-fibre network.

ROS PAGE

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Banks rake in an extra $2bn

Australia's largest credit card providers have raked in an extra $2.07 billion in credit card interest in recent years as a result of failing to pass on official interest rate cuts to consumers.

Research undertaken by CHOICE and financial comparison site mozo.com.au has found that Australia's credit card issuers have hit the average credit card holder up for an extra $281 since 2011 by not passing on Reserve Bank (RBA) rate cuts. The big four banks control over 80% of the credit card market, and earn the most from the interest rate rort.

Official interest rates have been on the decline for the past four years. Interest rates were at 4.75% in June 2011 and since then have more than halved to reach the current level of 2%. But it seems the big banks haven't been passing on the benefits of this to their customers when it comes to credit cards.

CHOICE and Mozo analysed 55 major card providers from November 2011 to May 2015 and discovered that only 16% of card providers made any change to interest rates in the month after a drop in the official cash rate. Our research examined the trends in the credit card market since late 2011, when providers stopped moving interest rates in line with the official cash rate.

"If credit card interest rates had moved in line with the Reserve Bank cash rate over the last four years, Australians would have saved $2.07 billion in interest payments," said CHOICE campaigns manager Erin Turner. Over the same time period, the banks' costs for providing credit have decreased.

"We know the average credit card interest rate in June 2011 was 17.41% but instead of falling in line with the cash rate it rose by 0.2% over the last four years to 17.61% by the 31st of May this year," Mozo director Kirsty Lamont said.

"We have also seen the average credit card annual fee rise from $94 in late 2011 to $115 in May 2015. Clearly consumers are getting a raw deal."

CHOICE will be presenting the detailed findings of our analysis as part of a submission to the upcoming Senate Committee on Economics Inquiry into Matters relating to credit card interest rates.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Rates go up on low-rate cards

It's not just the regular credit cards with high rates. Three of the big four banks have increased interest rates on their 'low' rate cards since 2013, despite the official interest rate falling to record lows.

The interest rates on ANZ, Commonwealth Bank, NAB and Westpac low-interest credit cards have moved by less than 1% over five years, with most rates increasing from 2013. Westpac was the only big bank that didn't increase the interest rate on its low-rate card over the past five years, leaving it at 13.49%.

Not only have the big banks failed to drop their interest rates on low rate cards since 2013, they also don't necessarily offer the best deal.

"Not one supposedly 'low' rate credit card from the big four banks is close to the best rate available to consumers, which is 8.99%, offered by Community First Credit Union," said CHOICE campaigns manager Erin Turner.

In addition, two of the consistently best performing cards in the market (by interest rate) – Community First Credit Union's McGrath Pink Visa and Bankmecu's Low Rate Visa – have dropped interest rates largely in line with cash rate movements.

JEMMA CASTLE

Spotlight on credit cards

77% of consumers have their primary credit card with a big four bank or bank owned by the big four.*

64% of people don't know the interest rate that applies to the credit card they use most often.*

21% of people never pay their credit card balance in full or only do so once or twice a year.*

$33bn The amount Australian households currently owe on credit cards**

Plastic's where the profit's at

Lenders are getting a far better rate of return on credit cards than they are on mortgages, with an estimated return on equity two-thirds higher than that on home loan interest rates, a Treasury inquiry into credit card interest rates has revealed.

The inquiry also found that profits made on credit cards by the big banks soared by nearly a third since the global financial crisis (GFC), despite the RBA slashing official interest rates (see story, p10).

Matt Levey, CHOICE director of campaigns and communications, says banks are trying to recoup their losses for lower profits on mortgages by rorting credit card holders: "When things start drying up on other products, they just increase the milking rate."

There are around 250 credit card products available from about 100 brands, but the amount of interest on the average credit card is still around 20%, and on a low-rate card it sits around 14%. Issuers appear to compete more on rewards, balance transfers and annual fees rather than headline interest rates.

Australian households currently owe around $33bn plus interest on credit cards, according to the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC). And not everyone's paying debts off before they start accruing interest, according to a Citibank survey of 1800 respondents – only 48% of middle income earners paid their credit card off in full each month.

The banks say there's no link between RBA cuts and credit card interest rates, despite the fact that rates have moved up and down with the RBA's official rate, up until the GFC.

But this argument by the banks doesn't make sense, said Levey.

"They've made us feel silly for thinking there ought to be a relationship. There is. Credit cards are not magically different [from other lending products]."

NATASHA PATCH

$850,000 to fly to London?

Loyalty rewards credit cards can be of little reward, especially for small spenders. With the worst card on offer, you'll need to wait 47 years before you've spent enough for a Sydney–London return flight, according to Mozo data. And that's assuming a spend rate of $1500 on your card each month.

With the best card on offer, it takes about four-and-a-half years and on average you only become a high flyer after saving your points for 10 years. Sydney to Melbourne return flights are more achievable, on average you can clock up enough points in just under eight months, but with the worst card it takes nearly three years.

For our full review of flight rewards cards with the best cards for $2000 and $5000 monthly spending, see page 41. **UTA MIHM**

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK/*CHOICE RESEARCH/**ASIC

Better advice for life

The financial services industry has finally gotten around to doing something about life insurance commissions – which can be as high as 130% of the first year's premium.

A damning Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) report released in late 2014 found that more than a few financial advisers are prone to chasing high commissions at the expense of consumers' best interests, leading to poor life insurance advice.

The Future of Financial Advice reforms that came into effect in July 2013 put the brakes on financial advice commissions of many kinds, but the life insurance industry dodged the reforms – unless the insurance is included in your super account .

Why does it matter if salespeople get high commissions for your business? Because insurance companies pass on the cost of incentivising their salespeople (generally financial advisers) to their customers – you.

REIGNING IN HEFTY INCENTIVES

In June 2015, federal Assistant Treasurer Josh Frydenberg released a series of proposals by the Association of Financial Advisers, the Financial Planning Association of Australia and the Financial Services Council to improve protections for life insurance customers.

The proposed reforms for adviser remuneration include:

- imposing a maximum upfront commission cap of 60% of the premium in the first year of the policy – a massive reduction from the current highs of 120–130% (from 1 July 2018)
- imposing a maximum ongoing commission cap of 20% of the premium in all subsequent years (from 1 January 2016).

CLAWING BACK COMMISSIONS

To cut down on the incidence of 'churn' – where policyholders bail out early because they find the cover is inappropriate or they just can't pay the premium – the industry is also proposing new limits on how much of the generous incentives financial advisers can hold onto.

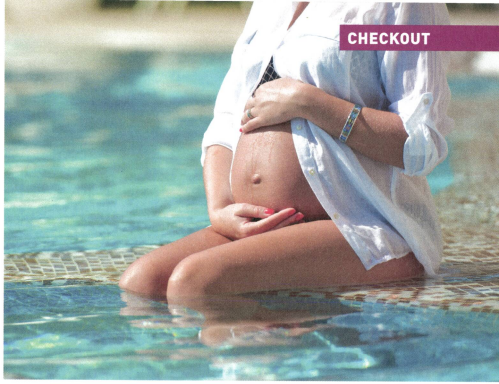
If a customer abandons the policy within the first three years, insurance companies would be able to recover, or claw back, the following portion of the commission:

- in the first year of the policy, 100% of the commission on the first year's premium
- in the second year, 60% of the commission on the first year's premium
- in the third year, 30% of the commission on the first year's premium.

The proposals also include a ban on volume-based payments (where advisers are paid bigger commissions for bringing through more customers) from 1 July 2016. And life insurance companies would have to offer fee-for-service products to support advisers who wish to operate on fee-for-service basis.

For the transition period until 2018, the industry agreed that the upfront commission should be capped at 80% of the premium in the first year starting 1 January 2016, 70% from July 2017, and 60% from 1 July 2018.

Gerard Brody, CEO of the Consumer Action Law Centre, welcomed the changes, but stressed that "robust and independent monitoring and enforcement" is needed to "truly protect Australians from the kind of behaviour we have seen in the past". **INES GRUBER**



IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Beating the babymoon blues

Pregnancy holidays – also known as 'babymoons' – are becoming more popular with people getting ready to welcome a new addition to their families.

The idea of packing your bags for one last chance to relax in an exotic location before the baby is born is alluring. In fact, health insurer Cover-More has reported the number of pregnant women seeking pre-travel health assessments for overseas travel has increased by more than 200% over the past five years.

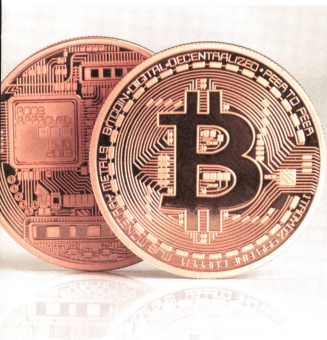
However, some babymoons can quickly turn into nightmares when things go wrong. So, if you want to plan a break before your baby arrives, make sure you have appropriate travel insurance cover, check the fine print, and be sure to ask your insurer the following questions:

- Do you cover pregnancy complications? If so, up until what stage of pregnancy?
- Do you cover childbirth and up until which stage of pregnancy? Not all insurers will cover childbirth. A premature birth in the US, for example, with intensive care and treatment, could end up costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.
- Do I have to pay extra to be covered?
- Do I need medical approval to be covered?
- Do you cover IVF pregnancies?

In our survey of insurers, Good2Go cover natural and IVF pregnancies until 26 weeks, and childbirth is covered up until this stage of pregnancy at no extra cost. Columbus Direct provides a pregnancy extension at additional charge up to 30 weeks.

Find out more in our free travel insurance review at **choice.com.au/travelinsurance**.

NATASHA PATCH



Bitcoins gain currency

Digital currencies such as bitcoin should be treated as money for the purposes of GST, according to a new recommendation from the Senate Economics References Committee.

Cyber currencies (of which bitcoins are just one) have a value and can be bought, sold and exchanged, and used to make purchases using a bitcoin wallet. However, their value can be volatile as they aren't controlled through a central bank.

If the recommendation is approved, the definition of money in the Goods and Services Tax Act would be amended to include digital currencies.

Not only is the committee's recommendation another nod of recognition for digital currencies, in practical terms it means the costs associated with buying and selling crypto-currencies in Australia would be reduced.

Adam Poulton, president of the Bitcoin Association of Australia – which advocates for the standardisation, protection, and promotion of cryptocurrencies – welcomed the recommendation, telling CHOICE he believes it will help proliferate the currency in Australia.

JEMMA CASTLE

Your Say

We want to hear from you! If you've had a bad experience, been ripped off or scammed, tell us and help other CHOICE members avoid the same traps. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and we regret that we cannot reply to all correspondence.

CONTACT US at yoursay@choice.com.au or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Magnum hopeless

While on holiday at 80 Mile Beach in WA, we decided to have a snack at the caravan park shop; I chose a Streets Magnum. I had noticed that there was a free ice cream if you were lucky enough to get the right pop stick as stated on the wrapper. Well, I don't often win things but I was very happy to note that I could receive a free ice cream with my winning handle.

Sadly, my joy was short-lived as the shop "doesn't participate in that promotion". I checked the wrapper to see if there was any exclusion and couldn't find any reference to that effect. Not that I am going to race back there to claim my prize but I would have thought that if you didn't participate in a promotion it would be better not to have that product in your shop.

Peter Scharf, Jurien Bay, WA

CHOICE SAYS: *This is actually a fairly common scenario with these promotions – it even happened to our very own consumer rights specialist recently! We checked with Unilever, Streets' parent company, and they confirmed that just because you bought an ice cream with promotional packaging from a particular shop, that doesn't mean that that business is participating in the promotion. All the ice creams, chocolate bars etc. involved in that promotion will be shipped to retailers with the same special wrappers while the promotion is on; if they want to sell the products as usual, they have to sell the promotional ones, but participating in the promotion isn't compulsory. However, retailers who do accept the winning sticks are given incentives by the manufacturer for giving away products as part of the promotion – so if the shop where you originally bought your treat isn't taking part, you can just lick that lucky wrapper or stick clean and pop it in your wallet until you find a retailer who'll exchange it for a freebie.*

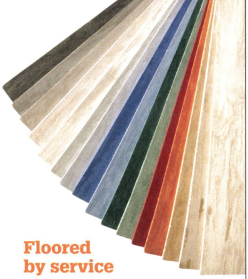
Thumbs

Thumbs up and a huge amount of praise to SMA Australia. We have two Sunny Boy (SMA) solar inverters which have been going wonderfully well since they were installed about four years ago. However, the perspex viewing cover on one became difficult to see through. I contacted SMA Australia and they immediately put a plan into place that meant we received a whole new bottom half of the entire cover, including the perspex and a new LCD display (motherboard) "as there is a possibility that this might be needed". Wow – that is going way beyond ordinary customer service.

Rod Lindroth, Maryborough, Vic

Recently I noticed some vertical lines on our four-year-old Series 7 Samsung LED TV. I contacted Samsung online, adding pictures of the offending lines. The next day I was contacted to say a service person would be there within the week to inspect the TV. He turned up that day and agreed that the screen needed replacing. This was done within a week at no cost for either parts or labour. What great service given that the TV was three years out of warranty. Our great consumer laws at work, and such good service also ensures loyalty.

Elaine Hughes, Taree, NSW



Floored by service

In 2010, you published my approval of exceptional service by Modern Floors of Daw Park, SA in repairing vinyl flooring laid by them in 2000. Further damage required attention recently and they again responded promptly. A subcontractor, DJ Vinyl Flooring, did the repairs at a very reasonable rate and there were no callout fees by either company.

J.L. Hourigan, Marion, SA

CHOICE SAYS: *We love to see this level of great ongoing customer service! Floors should last a reasonably long time, so the fact that this business is committed to helping you keep yours in top condition long after your initial purchase is an excellent sign.*

IMAGES: ISTOCK & SHUTTERSTOCK

Five years ago I purchased a pair of Blundstone boots for gardening, thinking they would last a very long time. Two months ago, on a very wet day, the soles and heels disintegrated totally. The warranty had well and truly expired, but I contacted Blundstone, who told me that hydrolysis occurs with the soles and heels as a result of not wearing the boots often enough. The very understanding staff offered to send me a pair of new boots and these arrived promptly. I was amazed and cannot recommend Blundstone enough. Anne Lawson, Mullumbimby, NSW

Mow problems

Jan from the Gold Coast in Queensland called CHOICE with a question about her new $600 Honda lawnmower. "I took it home and it was fine. I put fuel and oil in it, used it and put it away in the shed. A couple of weeks later I went to take it out and there was a big puddle of oil. I took it back to the mower shop and they said they'd replace the oil seal as it was broken. They did that, then I used it and put it away again. A couple of weeks later there was a big puddle of oil again. I asked for a refund or replacement but they said no. They said the whole bottom of the engine needs to be replaced and it will take a month. I don't want a faulty repaired machine, because I bought a new one. What are my rights?"

CHOICE HELP *suggested that Jan call the retailer again, tell them she had contacted CHOICE and that we are interested in how the claim progresses. We said that Jan should point out that the mower is suffering from a major failure to comply with the consumer guarantees under the Australian Consumer Law and that she would like to reject it and take a refund or a replacement. Jan did this and sent us an email to say:*

"Your suggestion did the trick. Within hours of me sending an email to Hinterland Mowers I received a phone call to say that my email had been sent to Honda Australia and that I would receive a phone call from them the following day. Within a few days the retailer rang to say that Honda was shipping a replacement mower and that they would deliver it to my home as soon as it arrived. When I asked if they would be out of pocket he assured me that they would not and everything had been settled.

"This is the very first time I have contacted CHOICE for advice in the many years I have subscribed and I am so glad that I did! Thanks so much for your help – I will think of you often when mowing the lawn."

CHOICE Help is our in-house advice service for CHOICE members. We'll arm you with the information and tools you need to tackle your consumer issue and help you work towards a solution.
CONTACT US at **consumeradvice@choice.com.au** or go to **choice.com.au/choicehelp**.

choice HELP

In the doghouse

Puppy farms have a record of overcrowding, squalid conditions and neglect. **Holly Enriquez** investigates how to be a responsible dog buyer

A 'puppy farm' may sound like a magical place, where pint-sized moodles, spoodles and cavoodles cavort in lush green pastures, but the reality is something very different indeed. Earlier this year, the owners of a Victorian 'puppy farm' pleaded guilty to 240 charges of animal cruelty following a raid of their Pyramid Hill farm.

The RSPCA found 235 dogs in wire cages on the property, in squalid and overcrowded conditions. Some dogs had died and those still living were underfed and filthy, many with serious health problems. At the time of prosecution it was reported in the media the owner had netted more than $250,000 over two-and-a-half years by selling puppies to pet shops.

This shocking case helped to spotlight the factory farming of companion animals in Australia, as the RSPCA and other animal welfare groups continue to campaign for setting minimum standards, to force the closure of unethical dealers.

What are puppy farms?

Puppy farms, also known as puppy factories or puppy mills, are intense breeding facilities that churn out puppy litters for profit, often at the expense of the health and wellbeing of the animals. Sadly, it's a lucrative business in Australia, and raises serious welfare concerns.

According to the RSPCA, a puppy-farming environment, where dogs can be caged in conditions similar to those of battery hens, can cause long-term health and behavioural problems in breeding dogs and their puppies, due to:

- inadequate and overcrowded housing conditions
- extreme confinement – in some cases breeding animals may never be allowed out of their cage to exercise, play, socialise, have companionship or even to go to the toilet
- inadequate veterinary care and general care (grooming and parasite control)
- unhygienic living conditions.

"The most distressing thing is the psychological damage," says Debra Tranter, founder of animal welfare group Oscar's Law (oscarslaw.org). "We've seen

dogs spinning in circles or chewing their own tails, or chewing the cage.

And a lot of these dogs completely shut down. They can't even make eye contact and refuse to eat and drink."

Tranter says she is aware of around 200 'legal' puppy factories currently operating in Victoria alone (meaning they are licensed and operate under local council permits) while countless others around Australia are running without permits, hiding their activities in isolated or remote areas.

Puppy farms produce all types and breeds of dogs, so buying a purebred is no guarantee it comes from a responsible breeder. Farmers also use every available avenue to sell their puppies to the public – including some pet shops. "If you buy a puppy from a pet shop and you don't know who the breeder is, then there's a risk that puppy may have come from a puppy farm," the RSPCA's Dr Jade Norris told CHOICE.

On 1 July the Victorian government imposed new regulations on pet shop owners, requiring they keep detailed records on every dog and cat for sale. Restrictions are set to get tighter with pet shops being limited to selling dogs and cats only from registered animal shelters or pounds.

Victorian Minister for Agriculture Jaala Pulford says there are plans to further crack down on puppy farms by introducing mandatory pre-mating vet checks, limiting breeding dogs to five litters, and restricting the number of breeding dogs per business to 10 by 2020.

Other state governments are also taking steps in the right direction, with the NSW government calling a parliamentary inquiry in May this year to assess current legislation and the lack of regulation in the industry.

But, according to RSPCA's paper *End Puppy Farming – the Way Forward*, there's still a long way to go: "There are insufficient standards nationwide to provide for the welfare and health of breeding dogs and puppies and ensure that puppies are appropriately reared to be suitable as companion animals."

How to find a breeder

Visiting your local animal rescue group or RSPCA (try rspca.org.au/adopt-pet) is a great way to find a pet or companion animal in need of a good home. However, if you have your heart set on buying from a dog breeder, there are steps you need to take to ensure you're dealing with a responsible one.

To start your search for a particular breed, contact your local kennel association, such as Dogs NSW (dogsnsw.org.au) or Dogs Victoria (dogsvictoria.org.au), and ask for a list of breeders for that particular breed.

"A responsible breeder will want to know that they are going to the right home and the appropriate home for their breed"

In its comprehensive *Smart Puppy Buying Guide*, the RSPCA advises: "Requirements for dog breeders vary from state to state, but it's a good idea to call your local council and ask whether breeders have to be registered with them and if there is a code of practice or guidelines that they should be following." If there are requirements in place, it suggests asking the breeder for their registration details and what guidelines they follow.

Dr Norris says it is critical when buying a new puppy to visit the place where it was born – something a puppy farmer generally won't allow you to do. This will give you the chance to check that the conditions are clean, there is enough space for the dogs to move around in and that the mother is happy and healthy.

Another sign that the breeder is ethical is if they're concerned about the welfare of their animals. "A responsible breeder will want to know that they are going to the right home and the appropriate home for their breed," says Tranter. "So they'll ask a lot of questions [of] the person that's purchasing the puppy."

Some important questions to ask the breeder

- ☐ How many pregnancies has the mother had? (Five should be the maximum)
- ☐ Are the pets bred to be free of inherited disorders? (see 'Health concerns and inherited diseases', below)
- ☐ Can you provide referees?
- ☐ Will you provide a guarantee and take back an unwanted animal within a specified time frame or as the result of an inherited disease?
- ☐ Has the puppy been microchipped, vaccinated, and treated for worms and fleas? Do you have records of these treatments?
- ☐ Can you provide a complete history of the puppy and allow inspection of records and paperwork?
- ☐ Are you a registered pedigree breeder (for purebreds)?

Health concerns and inherited diseases

When buying a new pet, it's important to be aware of the inherited diseases and health conditions associated with the breed. The University of Sydney's *Listing of Inherited Disorders in Animals* (sydney.edu.au/vetscience/lida/dogs) provides information on common disorders for a range of breeds. A responsible breeder ▸

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

will be aware of any conditions specific to their breed and exclude any dogs with problems from breeding. Ask to see copies of vet reports and screening tests for confirmation. Inherited health problems are also more likely to surface in inbred animals, so if you're buying a purebred dog, check its pedigree to make sure it has no close relative matings.

There is a particular concern that some purebred breeders irresponsibly mate their animals to make them more aesthetically desirable, which can cause associated health problems. For example, features such as a squished-in face or very short legs may be attractive to some pet-owners, but can cause breathing troubles and spinal problems for your pet. A beautiful dog may not necessarily be a healthy dog and above all, a good breeder will value health, welfare and temperament above current trends.

"There are a lot of longstanding myths," says Dr Norris. "For example, if you bought a puppy from a champion who has won awards in the show ring you might think the puppy is going to be healthy, and that's not necessarily the case."

If you're buying a crossbreed, the risks of it having inherited diseases are lower, but background checks on its history are still important. Wally Conron, who bred the first labradoodle when working for the Royal Guide Dog Association of Australia in the 1980s, has since claimed he created a 'Frankenstein'. "All these backyard breeders have jumped on the bandwagon and they're crossing any kind of dog with a poodle," he told *Psychology Today*. "They're selling them for more than a purebred is worth and they're not going into the backgrounds of the parents of the dogs. There are so many poodle-crosses having fits, problems with their eyes, hips and elbows, and a lot have epilepsy. There are a few ethical breeders, but very, very few."

Choosing to buy your puppy from a responsible breeder (or your local RSPCA or shelter) will not only get you the healthiest and happiest pup possible, it will ensure you're not funding an industry that puts profit before welfare. If you'd like to help make a change, visit closepuppyfactories.org to pledge your support. ■

Should you buy from a pet shop?

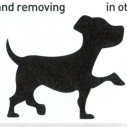
Last year, a woman brought home a $2300 English Staffordshire terrier puppy, 'Torro', from a Perth pet store, only to rush it to a veterinary hospital one week later. The pup was diagnosed with bronchopneumonia and died shortly after, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported.

Later it was discovered that the dog had been shipped all the way to WA from a 'stud' farm in NSW where approximately 200 animals were living in sub-standard conditions. Since Torro's death, the RSPCA has visited the property several times, finding numerous breaches to the Animal Welfare Code of Practice and removing more than 80 animals.

The pet shop that sold the dog was a member of the Pet Industry Association of Australia (PIAA), which at the time guaranteed that puppies bought from its member retail stores are not the product of puppy farms. But Debra Tranter from Oscar's Law says puppy farmers often use a third party to cover their tracks when selling to pet shops. "Most puppy farmers use a broker," she says. "A broker will travel around to a number of different puppy farms, buy the litters and then onsell the litters to the pet shops." The PIAA has since confirmed to CHOICE that the pet shop is no longer a member.

While regulations governing pet shops are being tightened in Victoria, laws vary in other states and the origin of your new puppy may not need to be disclosed.

Torro's sad case highlights the importance of visiting the home of your new puppy before purchase, something that pet shop windows just won't allow you to do.



Let it go

From toothbrushes to smoke alarms – how often should you replace your everyday items? **Natasha Patch** finds out

There are lots of consumer goods you wouldn't dream of keeping past their expiry date. Even if your cheese didn't have a use-by stamp on it, you'd probably know when it was past its best.

But what about everyday household items that, technically, aren't perishable? How often should you replace your pillow? Or your toothbrush?

To find out how long some common everyday household items should last, we spoke to a number of retailers and manufacturers in the relevant industries and compared what they had to say with advice from non-industry experts. To get the consumer's perspective, we also asked 487 Voice Your Choice members how often they replace everyday items, from steam mops to smoke alarms.

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Sponges

It probably comes as no surprise: your sponge is a germ magnet. "Sponges are an excellent breeding ground for germs because they're kept moist and in contact with nutrients. Whether the types of germs are harmful is another question," says Dr Nick Coleman, a microbiologist at the University of Sydney, who has studied bacteria found in the cloths used to wipe down tables in shopping centres. The crevices of a sponge also make for an attractive expanse of surface area for bacteria to colonise, he says.

Tips

Avoid letting your sponge sit in water by wringing it out after each use, and make sure food particles don't get trapped inside.

To avoid cross-contamination, never use your kitchen sponge to wipe up meat juices. Use a paper towel instead.

How to clean a sponge Researchers at the US Department of Agriculture found that over 99% of bacteria, yeasts and moulds were killed after microwaving damp sponges for one minute (make sure they are moist before microwaving, or they could catch fire). Aside from this, the simplest and most effective way to care for your sponge between replacements is to kill germs with bleach or hot water and detergent.

We asked some well-known cleaning brands when their sponges should be replaced. "Our Stay Clean products should be replaced once they are no longer performing as intended," said a spokesperson from Scotch-Brite. "This timing can vary depending on what they are being used to clean, how heavily and how often." A Chux representative agreed, but also recommends replacing cloths when they become discoloured or develop an odour.

Voice Your Choice results 66% of respondents replace sponges at least once a month.

When to replace

There's no hard and fast rule – it all comes down to the amount of use

Pillows

Most of us probably don't think a lot about what's inside our pillow, let alone how often we should replace it. According to manufacturer Tontine, your pillow collects dead skin cells, dust mites and fungi as you sleep. In 2010, Tontine started stamping their pillows with a two-year replacement date, leading to a 20% increase in sales over the following year. But was this just a clever marketing ploy?

"That guideline is putting it strongly; I'm not going to endorse a two-year period," says Associate Professor Euan Tovey, an allergen and dust mite expert from the University of Sydney. Tovey says most of our exposure to dust mites comes from our clothing, not our bedding. And for the record, he adds it's the dust mites' faeces (not the mites themselves) that some people are allergic to.

Hygiene aside, how do you know if your pillow is giving you enough support or if it's time to cast it aside?

According to the Australian Physiotherapy Association, your pillow may not be supporting your spine and neck if you're waking up with headaches and neck pain. Whether you're lying on your back or your side, a pillow should place your head and neck in a neutral or 'midline' position. When buying a new one, it's important to remember that one size doesn't fit all. You should replace your pillow when it stops providing you with adequate support, meaning your neck should remain in the correct position and you should have no neck pain or headaches.

Therapeutic Pillow Australia, manufacturer of contour and memory foam pillows, recommends replacing their pillows every twelve months to two years. Pillows that contain memory foam and latex are more durable than other types (polyester, for example), maintaining support for longer without a reduction in comfort. (See our guide to buying the right pillow for you at **choice.com.au/pillows**). They also hold their structure for longer which means they need to be replaced less often.

When to replace

The manufacturers we spoke to say at least every two years, but our experts tell us it all depends on the type of pillow you have

Voice Your Choice results

39% of respondents said pillows should be replaced every two to three years.

Toothbrushes

Brushing is critical to maintaining oral hygiene, so it's important to know when your toothbrush is no longer effectively cleaning your teeth. Over time, the bristles break down and lose their ability to get at all those tricky areas inside your mouth.

The Australian Dental Association's Oral Health Committee recommends replacing toothbrushes when the bristles are worn or distorted, normally every couple of months. It's better to use a soft bristled brush, and if it's wearing out quickly (i.e. within a month or so) you might need to evaluate your brushing technique.

Toothbrush brands Sensodyne, Colgate, and Oral B recommend replacing your toothbrush every three months. Some toothbrushes have bristles that change colour when it's time to throw them out. Some people advise throwing out your toothbrush after you've had a cold or flu virus, since germs could linger in the bristles. But according to the Oral Health Committee, that theory is not based on evidence.

When to replace

Every two to three months

Voice Your Choice results 50% of respondents thought a toothbrush should be replaced every two to three months.

When to replace
About every 10 years

Mattresses

The longevity of a mattress depends on several factors, including how well it's made and how much you use it, according to The Better Sleep Council (a 'consumer-education arm' of the industry group International Sleep Products Association).

The council says to consider replacing your mattress if you wake up with stiffness, aches and pains, if you have a much better night's sleep somewhere else, or if your mattress shows visible signs of overuse such as sagging, stains and rips. David Hillman from the Sleep Health Foundation says a mattress generally has a lifespan of around ten years, but you should replace yours when it starts to feel uncomfortable. If you're not ready to invest in a new one, a mattress topper is a good way to add comfort.

Studies have shown that changing an ageing mattress can help improve your quality of sleep. You can improve the longevity of your mattress by rotating it once every few months and flipping it over. Sealy Posturepedic and SleepMaker told us that most of their beds come with a 10-year guarantee. Tempur mattresses come with a five-year full warranty, and 15-year 'limited' warranty. CHOICE's June Mattress Satisfactory Survey Results reveal that Tempur has the highest owner satisfaction of 88%.

Voice Your Choice results 47% of respondents said mattresses should be replaced every ten years.

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Chopping boards

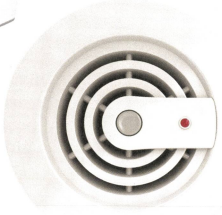
When it comes to choosing between a plastic or wooden board, our microbiology expert says there's no real advantage either way: plastic is less permeable than wood, but wood has natural antibacterial properties. We also enquired about an 'end grain chopping board' at Myer that claimed to be more durable than regular cutting boards due to a greater tolerance for chopping motions, and were told that, with proper care, the board can last 'years'.

How to care for your chopping board We spoke to two retailers, who both recommend boards are 'cleaned thoroughly' and, in the case of wood chopping boards, seasoned with oil to maintain the surface.

Chopping boards can be a danger item in the kitchen because of the risk of contamination if you use the same board to cut up low-risk and high-risk foods. The riskiest food is raw chicken. "All chicken you buy has some levels of salmonella; it's found in their gut," Coleman says. "Be wary of how you handle it in the kitchen." Clean your chopping board immediately after use – the simplest and most effective way is with hot water and detergent.

Voice Your Choice results 34% of respondents have been using their current chopping board for more than five years, and 60% used a separate board for different food groups.

When to replace
When your board is looking worse for wear



Smoke alarms

According to the Queensland government, your risk of death from a house fire is three times greater if you don't have a smoke alarm. That's why your home should be properly fitted with smoke detectors – and it's up to you to keep them maintained. Smoke alarms should be replaced every ten years or when the expiry date is reached, according to Fire and Rescue NSW.

The date should be visible on the base of your smoke alarm. In between battery changes, smoke alarms should be lightly dusted to keep the vents clear. The WA Department of Fire and Emergency Services recommends you check them every month, replace the batteries every year, and get a new one every 10 years.

We also spoke to a customer service representative from Quell, a manufacturer of fire-safety equipment, and were told that all smoke alarms have a 10-year warranty.

When to replace
Every 10 years

Voice Your Choice results 29% didn't know when to replace a smoke alarm, but 28% agreed with our experts and said they should be thrown out every 10 years. ■

Up to the task

Finding the right person for the job – at the right price – has never been easy, but tasking websites claim to make hiring a tradie a cinch. Elisabeth Baulch investigates

When you've got a fried downlight or a rogue tree giving your garden too much shade, finding a reliable professional to sort it out can be a shot in the dark. Unless you were lucky enough to have a long list of plumber, sparkie and chippie friends, your best option in days gone by was to thumb through the Yellow Pages hoping to land on a trustworthy tradie by sheer luck.

Then along came the internet, and now the shoe is on the other foot. Not only can we check out a service provider's reputation online, with tasking websites we can even skip the ring-around and have the tradies contact us.

How does it work?

CHOICE looked at sites including Airtasker, Oneflare, ServiceSeeking and Hipages. They have their differences, but the basic premise is the same:

- You post your task on the site.
- You receive quotes from workers who are up for the job.
- You can check out their profiles, read reviews from other customers, and ask questions if necessary.
- You choose who you want to do the job.

How much does it cost?

It's free to post a task and there's no obligation for you to hire. Instead, the tradie or business pays a small fee each time they make a bid for a job, or they pay a regular membership fee.

Why use a tasking website?

Whether you find a tradie through the phone book, the internet or an ad on a telephone pole, there's always a risk that their work won't be up to the standard you want. But the benefit of using tasking sites is that you can check reviews from other customers and save yourself time ringing around for quotes.

Airtasker

airtasker.com

More than 300,000 'taskers' are registered. While there are plenty of qualified professionals on the site, it's also used for odd jobs. "If you need help with something completely different – like making a party costume, reorganising your wardrobe or delivering a surprise gift to a friend – you can find people on Airtasker that can help with almost anything," says co-founder and CEO Tim Fung, who describes the site as being "sort of like eBay for services".

Trust: All taskers verify their identities by connecting their social media accounts, but not all will be qualified, registered or insured. Workers with Airtasker PRO badges have been verified at a higher level, including an interview with an Airtasker community manager and a check of their personal ID, insurance and ABN. An extra level of security is

oneflare.com.au

More than 60,000 businesses are registered. The services most often requested are cleaners, removalists, pet groomers, gardeners and electricians.

Trust: Businesses have a profile score, which increases if their ABN, licence number and contact details are verified. A rep from Oneflare also told us, "We continuously monitor the customer reviews of each business. By doing so, we are able to quality check our businesses from real experiences, not just licences and qualifications."

Insurance: Businesses with the 'Verified' badge have had the validity of their public liability insurance and ABN confirmed. Businesses with the 'Home Care' guarantee badge are covered by Oneflare's limited insurance – offering up to $500 in repair work by another Oneflare business in the case of negligence or intentional damage.

hipages.com.au

Home improvements start here

More than 40,000 businesses are registered. Hipages has been around for 11 years and is specifically for building and renovation jobs (the 'hi' stands for 'home improvement').

Trust: The Hipages consumer service team reviews and checks the qualifications of all businesses and tradespeople registered on the site.

Insurance: Hipages doesn't extend insurance to its users. You should check that the service provider you're hiring has the appropriate insurance.

Tip: Hipages charges tradespeople higher fees than most other tasker sites. For that reason, you may not get the bargain basement price you were hoping for, but that's not necessarily a bad thing if you want quality work done.

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

Airtasker Pay, which means your payment is held in an "Airtasker trust account" until both parties are satisfied with the job performed.

Insurance: Airtasker has public liability insurance of up to $20 million for third-party property damage or personal injury claims, but this excludes services provided by security guards, child minders, builders, excavators, transporting/taxi services, driving instructors and currency conversion/money lending.

"They were not a qualified carpenter so the work wasn't amazing but it did the job and was super cheap! We would have definitely paid more than double if we had booked through a tradie"

– CHOICE staffer Katinka, who used Airtasker for a simple carpentry job

serviceseeking.com.au

More than 115,000 businesses are registered. ServiceSeeking is a marketplace for all sorts of professionals, from tradespeople to accountants to graphic designers.

Trust: All businesses on the site have completed an identification check, have a valid ABN and have completed an online declaration that they're licensed to do the work they're quoting on. Businesses marked as 'Certified' have completed a free online training course which teaches them how to quote, follow up and respond to customer needs. To weed out poor service, ServiceSeeking has a "two complaints and you're out" policy.

Insurance: ServiceSeeking doesn't extend insurance to its users. Check that the business you're hiring has the appropriate insurance.

Tip Unlike some other services, there's no limit to the number of quotes you can receive from businesses via ServiceSeeking. To avoid being swamped, once you have enough quotes you can hit the 'Stop quotes' button.

CHOICE staffer Christine used ServiceSeeking for a number of home improvement jobs including electrical work, timber staining and asbestos removal. She was happy with the work done, but offers this advice for using ServiceSeeking and sites like it:

- Make the description of your job as clear as possible.
- Be prepared for lots of return emails and phone calls in a short time.
- Take the ad down as soon as you have enough quotes.
- Do not necessarily accept the price quoted – they have to quote a price to get your contact details, but it could be up for negotiation.
- Arrange an on-site inspection so both parties know what is needed.

'Undercut-a-thon'

Beware of accepting the lowest quote – you may get what you pay for. "It's become an undercut-a-thon and the cheap and nasties are winning," warns one Sydney motor trimmer of the competition he feels he's up against.

Tips for hiring tradies through tasking sites

Consumer Affairs Victoria offers these tips:

- Know exactly what you want and describe it in detail, using photos if you can.
- Check the licence or registration of the tradesperson through the appropriate authority in your state.
- Ask to see certificates of currency for public liability insurance.
- Get everything in writing. A major domestic building contract is generally required for work over $5000 but Consumer Affairs Victoria recommends a written contract for all renovation work.
- Get three quotes and choose based on what they offer, not just price.
- Always get a receipt for the work, particularly if you're paying in cash.

Dodgy jobs

Since 2005, NSW Fair Trading has received more than 70 complaints about a number of tasking sites; however, the vast majority were from businesses disputing fees and directory listings, rather than from customers.

Customers were more likely to have made complaints against the service provider, rather than the website. One customer filed a complaint against a service provider who asked for money upfront to purchase materials, then never returned to do the job.

Tasking sites act as a marketplace or middleman connecting consumers and service providers, so if things go wrong, most will only offer you limited help or compensation.

If the job goes wrong

- Raise your concerns with the service provider – if there's no resolution, contact your consumer protection agency.
- Contact the tasking site and tell them about your experience – they may choose to strike the worker off their books.
- Leave a review for other customers.

Do your homework

By law, certain jobs require a licensed tradesperson or building practitioner. Check with the licensing authority in your state or territory to find out if you need a qualified tradie.

You should also check the credentials of the person or business you're hiring, even if their online profile says that they're licensed.

You may be happy to hire an unqualified person to carry out simple tasks and fixes, but be aware that they may not have insurance, they may not be covered by your own home insurance, and your state consumer protection body may not be able to help you in a dispute.

Safety

Lisa posted a job on Airtasker for a handyman to assemble her bedroom furniture. She wasn't concerned about qualifications, but she lives alone so she was concerned about safety. After only receiving quotes from men, she says, "I hired the guy with the most reviews from women."

Other helpful sites

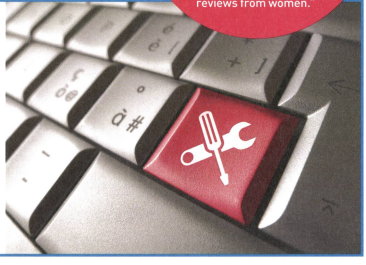
ratemytradie.com.au A tasker site similar to Oneflare or Hipages.

tradebusters.com.au A sort of middleman or agent – you tell them what you need done and they find you a trusted tradie who's right for the job.

tradiefinder.com Search by region and trade for reviewed and recommended service providers, and then send them an SMS enquiry.

truelocal.com.au A directory of not just tradies, but restaurants, hotels, shops, accountants and more – all with customer reviews.

womo.com.au Word Of Mouth Online – a business review site recently acquired by Oneflare. ■



Less than upfront

Jemma Castle finds that even if an organisation claims to be acting in consumers' best interests, it's not always the case

Ever come across a campaign or organisation that claimed to be acting in consumers' interest, but seemed to be benefiting industry instead? It's called 'astroturfing', a practice that does indeed take its name from the artificial turf. The link between the two? Both have fake 'grass roots'.

Sharon Beder, an honorary professor at the University of Wollongong, has written extensively on the topic. She says the difference between astroturfing and groups promoting a corporate agenda is deception. "Front groups try to disguise who they are, and try to be something they're not," she says.

The link between 'astroturfing' and artificial turf? Both have fake 'grass roots'

Spot the front group

It's not always easy to tell a group merely claiming to act in the public interest, from one that actually is. Anyone can start a group and create a website, which is fair enough in a democratic society, says Beder. But free expression also means it's easy for front groups to proliferate.

Front groups usually emerge when an organisation is unsuccessful in having its viewpoint heard through the political system, or when its position is threatened either by forthcoming regulation or staunch public opinion.

According to Beder, while there are some restrictions over the use of words such as "consumer", "trust", "foundation" and "charity" in business or association names, there are still plenty of words that confer a sense of trust and authority that can be used without restriction. For example, the Business Name Registration Act doesn't limit the use of words such as "alliance", "coalition" or "institute".

Who wants to keep bank fees high?

A recent example of this sort of astroturfing in Australia is the Don't Change My Interchange campaign. Its message is clear – keep the fees that banks charge other banks for processing card payments at current levels. What the campaign is not so clear about is that it's the banks and card issuers such as MasterCard and Visa who'll benefit if these interchange fees are kept at current levels. ▸

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Astroturfing in Australia

Beyond the Don't Change My Interchange campaign, there are a range of groups which operate in different ways to shift political debate. We look at a few others.

ALLIANCE OF AUSTRALIAN RETAILERS

MISSION: "To fight the Federal Government's plans to introduce plain packaging of tobacco products and other proposals for tobacco regulation that aren't evidence based".

FUNDED BY: Philip Morris (now Altria Group), British American Tobacco and Imperial Tobacco Australia.

The Alliance of Australian Retailers (AAR) was set up by big tobacco companies to challenge plain packaging law. It claims to represent small retailers, such as the owners of your local newsagent, corner store, or independent service station.

One concerned shopkeeper is quoted on its site as saying: "My parents help me to run the store. They are old and have trouble with their eyesight and they are having real difficulties reading the small text and not having any colours to help them quickly identify brands." Beder says corporations sometimes seek out or create third parties such as the AAR to promote their views because the public will be more likely to listen.

She adds that front groups often try to gain traction for their message by casting doubt on evidence that's unfavourable to their position and promoting counter-evidence. The AAR claimed there was no evidence plain packaging would work, and then used a self-commissioned study to show that the legislation could cost small retailers up to $34,000 a year in lost time as they grope amid plain packages for the right brand – a claim which has been refuted by independent research.

TOGETHER COUNTS CAMPAIGN

MISSION: The campaign is about "energy balance". It was started by the Healthier Australia Commitment, "a food industry-led, multi-year strategy designed to help Australians live healthier, active lives".

FUNDED BY: PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, Sugar Australia, Campbell Arnott's, Unilever, Lion, Nestle, General Mills and the Infant Nutrition Council (the association for the infant formula industry in Australia).

The Together Counts campaign attributes the increasing rates of obesity in Australia to an "energy imbalance", a problem which can be counteracted by balancing the number of kilojoules we eat or drink with the amount we burn through activity. One of its infographics assures us that this isn't hard, providing examples such as "balancing" a 50g chocolate bar with a 30-minute bike ride, and a salad sandwich (which has less energy and more nutrients than the chocolate) by cleaning the house for 45 minutes. This suggests what we eat isn't important, so long as we do enough exercise. This focus on energy balance reframes obesity from being a public health problem to one of individual

What are interchange fees?

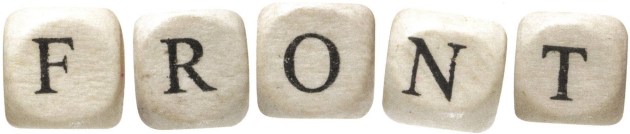
When you use your credit or debit card to buy something, your bank charges the merchant's bank an interchange fee for facilitating the payment. The merchant's bank passes that fee on to the merchant. A higher interchange fee means merchants pay more to accept cards, and those costs can be passed on to consumers as a card surcharge, or as higher prices.

CHOICE believes lowering interchange fees would be good for consumers

CHOICE believes lowering interchange fees would be good for consumers, and it was also recommended by the Financial System Inquiry. But the Don't Change My Interchange campaign makes the case that reducing interchange fees will be harmful to consumers, arguing that the key benefits of credit cards could be taken away, such as the ability to use your card in stores and online, fraud protection, free credit for up to 55 days, and low interest rates. We see these claims as scaremongering. There's no good evidence we've seen to show these benefits have been taken away in other countries where interchange fees are lower.

An inconvenient truth

Some of the evidence cited by the Don't Change My Interchange campaign to support its claims about the impact of lowering interchange fees doesn't quite stack up. One of the campaign's claims is that cardholders are paying more in credit card fees since interchange rates



responsibility. The campaign also deflects attention from data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which shows over a third of the average adult daily energy intake comes from discretionary food and drinks (which many of the campaign supporters happen to manufacture).

THE BEVERAGE INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND WELLNESS

MISSION: To "use evidence-based science to advance knowledge and understanding of beverages, beverage ingredients, and the important role that active healthy lifestyles play in supporting health and wellbeing".

FUNDED BY: Coca-Cola

While the institute is upfront about its funding source, it doesn't necessarily present all the facts. The site focuses on topics such as hydration and energy balance, which deflects attention from the high sugar content in some of Coca-Cola's products. For example, a 600mL bottle of Coca-Cola accounts for 71% of an adult's recommended daily sugar intake.

The institute's "hydration expert", Dr Ann Grandjean, suggests that while water is critical for hydration, its dietary source isn't important. To prove this, her article refers to a study that compares hydration outcomes for someone drinking one-third plain water and two-thirds soft drinks, juice and coffee versus someone who just drank soft drinks, juice and coffee. "We found no differences in markers of hydration, which suggested that although the body needs water, it doesn't need drinking water per se, as long as adequate amounts of other beverages are consumed," writes Grandjean. But the study proves very little – it doesn't compare an intake of 100% water, and it ignores the health implications of drinking sugar-laden beverages. Jane Martin, executive manager of the Obesity Policy Coalition, says, "Sugary drinks, such as soft drinks, sports drinks and fruit drinks, are packed with sugar and are recognised as a major contributing factor to overweight and obesity in Australian adults and children."

"Research has shown that consuming just one can of soft drink a day can lead to 6.75kg weight gain in one year," says Martin. She adds that, despite what companies like Coca-Cola may say, sugary drinks should never be recommended as part of a healthy diet.

were regulated by the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) in 2003.

It's a long bow for the campaign to draw – the implication is that banks have increased card fees to cover declining revenue from interchange fees. But credit card fees have increased rapidly, unconnected to RBA regulation. For example, figures from the RBA show that credit card fees increased by 5.9% in 2013–14, despite the RBA's interchange fee benchmark remaining steady.

Who's behind it?

All of this raises the question – who's behind the campaign? Turns out it's backed by the International Alliance for Electronic Payments (IAEP), an organisation about which there's very little information online. Its website claims it's "a coalition of international free-market organisations who are concerned that interchange fee regulation has negatively affected the poor, consumers, small community-lending institutions and the economies of countries around the globe". The only publicly linked organisation in Australia is the Australian Taxpayers Alliance, a group that promotes low tax, small government and a market-based economy.

MasterCard helps fund the IAEP, the group behind the Don't Change My Interchange campaign

What the IAEP doesn't disclose is its funding sources – a tell-tale sign of a front group says Beder. When we asked likely beneficiary MasterCard if it was one of the funders, it admitted contributing to IAEP, though it maintains that it doesn't control the Don't Change My Interchange campaign.

"It seems to me fair to call the IAEP a front group," says Beder.

"The campaign includes a phony grassroots movement (astroturf) that is little more than unverified signatures on a petition collected by the IAEP itself, on a website that provides one-sided [and] biased information". ■

IMAGES: ISTOCK AND SHUTTERSTOCK

Doing the maths

Can kilojoule labelling really help you make better fast food choices, and can you trust the numbers? **Rachel Clemons** tucks in

The lure of fast food can be hard to resist, especially when you're on the run. Sure, there are better food choices out there. But now that some fast food merchants are listing kilojoules on the menu board (and sometimes nutrition information on food wrappers), you at least have the option of checking the health stats before you commit.

The more you know

In our nationally representative survey of 1086 consumers, 71% said it's important that nutrition information is available at the point of sale in fast food outlets. And 37% of Australians have made fast food choices based on the nutrition information they've seen.

A recent study from the University of Sydney looked at the effect of kilojoule labelling on fast food choices by uni students on campus and found that it can shave almost 1000kJ from their average daily diet.

Kilojoule labelling on fast food menu boards is only mandatory in NSW, ACT and SA (if there are 20 or more outlets in the state or 50 nationally). And while some of the bigger fast food chains provide nutrition information even where it's not compulsory, we think it should be mandatory across the country.

Running the numbers

The average fast food meal provides 47%, or about half, of an adult's daily energy requirement, according to Cancer Council NSW.

An average Big Mac, for example, contains 2060kJ, which is roughly one quarter of your recommended daily intake (DI)*. And an average large chips at Nando's contains 4150kJ – about half your recommended DI.

But you don't have to wolf down half of your daily kilojoules in one sitting. By choosing items based on the kilojoule information on menu boards you can make better (though not necessarily healthy) fast food choices.

Better choices

It's basic mathematics. Swapping a large **Crumbed Chicken Caesar salad** (2650kJ) for a large **Fragrant Vietnamese Chicken salad** (1424kJ) at Sumo Salad saves you 1226kJ – so you're getting 16% of your DI instead of 30%.

And while it might seem blindingly obvious that choosing a smaller serve size will mean you get fewer kilojoules, it's

surprising just how many you can save by downsizing rather than ditching your favourites altogether.

- Swapping a **Double Whopper** (3933kJ) for a **Whopper** (2886kJ) at Hungry Jack's saves you 1047kJ, meaning you're getting 33% of your DI instead of 45%.
- Swapping a **Triple Fillet Bondi Burger with Chilli** (3170kJ) for the **single fillet** version (1620kJ) at Oporto saves you 1550kJ, so you're getting 19% of your recommended DI instead of 36%.

And if you're tempted to choose the "meal deal" or upsize your extras because it's better value for money, consider the impact on your health, not just your wallet. By upsizing from a KFC **Zinger Burger** (1740kJ) to a **Zinger Burger Combo** (with regular chips and a can of Pepsi 3308kJ), for example, you pay 36% more but get 90% more kilojoules.

37% of Australians have made fast food choices based on nutrition information

Is the information accurate?

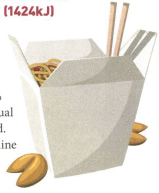
CHOICE went on a fast-food spree, grabbing standard items from McDonalds (Big Mac and fries), Hungry Jacks (a Whopper and fries), KFC (Zinger burger and seasoned chips), Subway (meatball sub on white bread with fixings), Dominos (Supreme pizza, classic crust), Pizza Hut (Super Supreme pizza, Perfecto dough base), Crust (Pepperoni pizza), Sumo Salad (Crumbed Chicken Caesar Salad), Oporto (single fillet Bondi Burger with chilli and fries), and Nando's (Classic Chicken Burger and chips).

We then rushed our fast feast off to an accredited lab to test the supplied nutrition information.

What we found is that the nutrients in the 15 items tested were more or less consistent with the nutrition information published by the food makers, which is good news for the many Australians relying on such info to make their food choices.

How accurate is "accurate"?

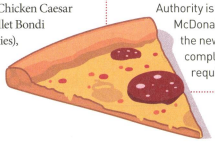
Taking a peek at the nutrition data before you tuck in is a good strategy for a nation of expanding appetites and waistlines, but it's important to know that the info won't necessarily be 100% accurate for the actual burger in your hand. The companies' online disclaimers say the listed information refers to average quantities, and that "seasonal variations and differences in product assembly" can affect what's actually in the wrapper, or words to that effect.



The Food Standards Code doesn't specifically prescribe permitted margins of error when it comes to the accuracy of nutrition information panels, but variations of +/- 20% are generally deemed to be acceptable, and this allowance was used in a recent NSW Health report on kilojoule labelling. The results from the products we tested generally fell within these limits.

BOARDED UP

McDonald's recently came under fire for the way it displays kilojoules on its new menu boards. Customers must wait for up to a minute for the animated menu to scroll through the full list of items, and the info for each individual product is only displayed (in faint print) for a matter of seconds. Critics say the new boards make it harder to see and, perhaps more importantly, compare the kilojoule content of its food. The NSW Food Authority is working with McDonald's to ensure the new boards comply with legal requirements.



CHOICE verdict

We're pleased that there's mandatory kilojoule labelling on fast food menu boards in NSW, ACT and SA, and we'd encourage people to seek out additional info (on sodium, sugars, and saturated fat, for example) from leaflets, display boards and food wrappers.

But considering the load of kilojoules on offer at cheap prices, we think the other states should think about our growing weight problem and also make kilojoule labelling on fast foods mandatory. ■

MADE WITH FRESH FOOD. WHERE FOOD IS SERVED. AVERAGE ADULT DIET OF 8700kJ. YOUR DAILY INTAKES MAY BE HIGHER OR LOWER DEPENDING UPON YOUR ENERGY NEEDS. PICTURES ARE EXACT TO WHAT'S SERVED IN STORE. BASED ON AN AVERAGE ADULT DIET OF 8700kJ.

Sleep interrupted

Snoring treatments range in price from the cost of a tennis ball to the cost of surgery – but which ones actually work? **Karina Bray** investigates

Night after night of disturbed sleep due to loud snoring is extremely trying on your health – and your relationship. If you're the snorer, the none-too-gentle kicks from the other side of the bed aren't great either. The good news is there are solutions to the problem, and they're cheaper than divorce!

What causes snoring?

Snoring happens when a collapse, blockage or restriction to the upper airway obstructs the flow of air through the back of the mouth or nose. The sound is created by the vibration of the soft tissues at the back of the throat.

Obesity is a common cause of snoring; overweight people have extra bulk around the neck that can restrict their airways. There's also experimental evidence that abdominal fat pushes the chest up towards the upper airway, which then loses its tension, becoming floppy.

Snoring is one of the main symptoms of sleep apnoea, where airways are obstructed during sleep until the person wakes up, often gasping for air. Sleep apnoea is more common among overweight people.

Drugs such as alcohol, muscle relaxants and sleeping tablets can cause snoring by making the tongue and muscles in the throat relax, go floppy and vibrate. Smokers are also more likely to snore than non-smokers.

Nasal congestion from a cold or allergies can cause snoring, as can eating too much at night, though this would be only temporary.

Anatomical problems that cause snoring are a bent septum (the wall that separates the nostrils), or enlargement of the tongue, uvula (the dangly thing at the back of your mouth), tonsils or adenoids.

Treatment

Snoring is a chronic condition, with no cure – rather, treatment strategies are based on management of it. Because there are many different causes of snoring, there's no one-size-fits-all solution.

Lifestyle modifications

Certain lifestyle changes can help with snoring, and are worth trying as a first line of treatment.

- If you snore because you're overweight, get some support to help you stick to a sensible eating and exercise plan. Even moderate weight loss has been shown to reduce or stop snoring.
- Avoid sleeping pills, tranquillisers and muscle relaxants. Talk to your

doctor about alternatives to medication for anxiety and sleep problems, such as cognitive behavioural therapy.
- Don't drink alcohol for at least four hours before going to bed.
- Quit smoking.

Talk to your doctor

Your GP can do a physical examination and make sure there's nothing more serious going on. Many regular snorers, especially heavy snorers, also have sleep apnoea. Sleep apnoea can cause high blood pressure, diabetes, heart attack and stroke. Poor sleep due to sleep apnoea can lead to daytime drowsiness, which impairs job performance and increases the risk of accidents.

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist sleep physician, or perhaps an otolaryngologist (or ENT – ear, nose and throat) surgeon.

Back snorer?

Many snorers only snore when they sleep on their back – the tongue and throat muscles relax, and slump backwards causing a partial blockage of the airway. If this is you, lying on your side may reduce the problem.

prone to tossing and turning.

ENT surgeon, Associate Professor Stuart Mackay, sometimes recommends a 'Rematee', which is a neoprene chest belt with back pockets that hold inflatable bumpers – a more sophisticated version of the tennis ball technique. They cost around $150. Another positional therapy product he uses is a Night Shift Sleep Positioner, an electronic device worn around the neck which vibrates when the wearer sleeps on their back, training them over time to sleep on their side. It costs $375.

Talk to your dentist

Dentists specialising in dental sleep medicine (or oral sleep medicine) supply and fit oral appliances to prevent snoring, usually in the form of a mandibular advancement splint (MAS). This device forces the lower jaw forward, increasing the air cavity at the back of the throat. They're very effective – as long as people can tolerate using them.

Experts say the newer appliances are more comfortable than the bulky mouthguards of old, and are good for people with apnoea who can't tolerate the CPAP machine (see right). The best devices are those customised to the individual – 'boil and bite' models are a lot cheaper, but not as effective.

You may need to go to the dentist a few times in the first few months for adjustments. You'll also need to get checked once a year for permanent movements of the jaw and teeth, which are not uncommon. Other potential negatives include dry mouth, irritation, dental discomfort and pain around the joint of the jaw.

A specialist we spoke to said the devices cost about $1700, including the visits required in the first few months. You may get about half of this back on private health insurance. He also said he offers a satisfaction guarantee – if you're not happy after three months, they'll refund 80% of the cost. If you go down this route, check for similar offers from your practitioner.

With only a handful of suitably qualified practitioners in major cities – it's not something any random dentist can do – it's important your sleep physician refers you to someone with appropriate experience.

Under pressure for a solution?

The most effective treatment for sleep apnoea is the continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine. By forcing air into the airways through a nasal mask, it prevents tissue in the throat from collapsing and cutting off air – and therefore oxygen – supply. And in keeping airways open, CPAP also prevents snoring.

Certain lifestyle changes can help with snoring, and are worth trying as a first line of treatment

So-called positional therapy involves techniques designed to make you sleep in a position where you don't snore, usually on your side. A simple DIY solution is placing a tennis ball into a pocket sewn onto the back of your pyjama top, making it uncomfortable to sleep on your back.

Anti-snoring pillows claim to prevent snoring by holding your head in a certain position – perhaps to encourage you to sleep on your side, or to 'correct head and spine alignment'. These sound like an appealingly simple solution, but unfortunately experts doubt a pillow could hold a person in one position for the whole night, particularly if they're

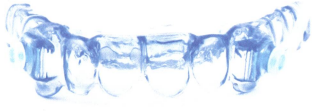


IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The prospect of using a CPAP machine, especially if it's only for snoring rather than sleep apnoea, can be daunting – the notion of wearing a mask all night can put some people off, and they may feel embarrassed about all the equipment or concerned about the effects on their bed partner. Once people have started using it, problems may include dryness (though you can get a humidifier) and air leakage (you may need a different mask).

However, it's very effective. The equipment is expensive, starting at around $1000, with a typical cost closer to $2000 or more, but you can rent a machine for a few weeks to see if it helps and if you like it. Talk to your doctor about whether it could be right for you.

30-40%
of people snore at least some nights

15%
of people snore most nights

Snoring on the nose?

Nasal strips and dilators are designed to open the nasal passages so the user can breathe more freely through the nose rather than the mouth. These devices could help a small number of people whose snoring is caused by certain types of nasal obstruction.

Based on the same principle as CPAP, Theravent is a single-use adhesive device with valve-type holes that you stick over the nostrils. The valves open when you breathe in, allowing the air to flow in easily, but partially close when you breathe out, providing resistance which increases the pressure in the airways. This helps to keep tissue from collapsing and thus prevents snoring.

Some people find them uncomfortable and intrusive, and they may take a few nights to get used to. The main problem, however, is that if you breathe through your mouth, the pressure is lost and the device has no effect. They're quite cheap, though at $1.25 to $1.50 a day you may feel the cost over time. But even if you don't use them full time, they could be a useful substitute for a CPAP machine if you're travelling or camping.

Surgery

There are several procedures that tighten the palate by causing tissue scarring and shrinkage, making it firm and less prone to vibration. Such treatments include some types of laser treatment (non-ablative laser that doesn't remove or cut tissue), radio frequency treatment, 'snoreplasty' – injections of hardening (sclerosing) agents into the palate, and the Pillar implant system, where small plastic rods are inserted in the palate.

These treatments are considered less invasive than other procedures, as they can be done under local anaesthetic, don't involve cutting and stitching, there's little (if any) down time, and little pain afterwards.

However, these therapies may still cost thousands without providing a long-term solution – you may need to go back for more. There's also concern that scarring could make other treatments, such as CPAP, difficult if needed in the future.

More invasive surgical procedures that involve removing tissue can help with snoring, but only if it's appropriate for the individual, such as those who aren't overweight but have a large palate, nasal blockage, enlarged tonsils or enlarged tongue causing obstruction. ■

Theravent

We asked five CHOICE snorers to put Theravent Regular to the test.

The device took a few nights to get used to, and the main issues were difficulty breathing though the nose, and a dry and/or sore mouth or throat from mouth-breathing. Three found it reduced snoring, but only two thought they might use them again – perhaps in situations where snoring would bother others.

What a hide!

With no regulation around labelling, how do you know if your "leather" couch is the real deal? **Kate Browne** investigates

Ahh, leather… The word alone conjures visions of luxury, sophistication and high prices, particularly if we're talking furniture. In fact, not very long ago a leather couch was likely to set the buyer back thousands of dollars, though it was also considered an investment piece that would age beautifully and last for years.

These days leather couches and chairs are advertised everywhere, and are often priced at well below $2000. But with the recent drop in cost comes the trade-off, where not all leather couches are equal – in fact, some are not really leather at all.

CHOICE has heard from unhappy consumers who have found themselves with "leather" couches that turned out to be more plastic than animal; others have found their couches are peeling and cracking in a way that genuine leather shouldn't, yet still don't know exactly what they've bought. And with no national standard for leather labelling in Australia, it's not easy to know exactly what you're buying when you see the word "leather" on a label.

What is leather, exactly?

To get technical, the British Standards Institute defines leather as "Hide or skin with its original fibrous structure more or less intact, tanned to be imputrescible. The hair or wool may, or may not, have been removed. Leather is also made from a hide or skin that has been split into layers or segmented either before or after tanning."

The amount of surface coating applied to the leather influences whether or not the item can be described as 'genuine' leather. "If the leather has a surface coating, the mean thickness of

IMAGE: GETTY/ISTOCK

this surface layer, however applied, has to be 0.15mm or less."

In a nutshell, there are three basic types of genuine leather:

- **Full-grain:** the full hide of the animal has been used with minimal interference. It's the most durable kind of leather, but also the rarest and usually the most expensive.
- **Top-grain:** Top-grain leather is the uppermost layer of the animal hide but has been buffed and polished.
- **Split:** Split leather is taken from the bottom of the hide. It's fairly fragile, but it is the cheapest type of leather available.

Corrected-grain is another common description, referring to any of the above leather that has had an artificial grain applied to its surface. Any imperfections are corrected or sanded off, and an artificial grain embossed into the surface and dressed with stain or dyes.

More complications

While the definitions above sound reasonably straightforward, if you go shopping for a leather couch you might see the words "cow hide leather", "genuine leather", "100% leather", "bonded leather", or even made-up names like "Lucia leather".

None of these names really give any indication of what kind of leather is being used or if, indeed, it's leather at all. For example,"bonded leather", despite the name, has more in common with synthetics and is technically not considered leather at all.

Other pieces of 'leather' furniture may have what are described as the "contact areas" (such as the seats, arm rests, vertical seat backs and rolls) upholstered in leather, but the "non-contact areas" (such as the outside arms and back) are upholstered in a leather-like synthetic material.

While the UK has a leather certification and testing body, in Australia it's up to shoppers to do the hard work if they are buying a leather couch. We found several sofas that were advertised as leather, yet the fine details disclosed that only the contact areas were actually leather. Other retailers gave little to no information about what the various components of their sofas were made of.

10%

The actual leather content of "bonded leather" in the 'Eurohide' and 'Pellisima' ranges from Fantastic Furniture pre-2010.

Paul Simmons, project coordinator at the Australasian Furnishing Research and Development Institute (Furntech), runs a voluntary certification scheme for leather goods in Australia. He says it's likely in many cases that while a couch may be all "leather", it's made out of differing types of leather, which can affect the quality.

Furntech's certification scheme, while voluntary, is used by some manufacturers and retailers in Australia, and the furniture that's been been tested will carry a swing tag confirming the certification.

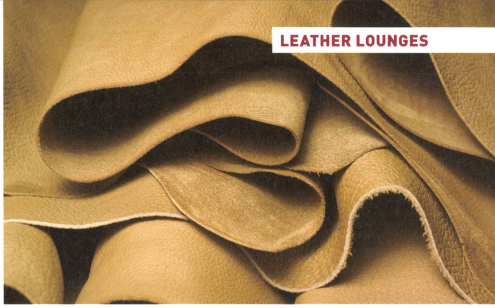
The Ikea website waxes lyrical: "There's something special about leather sofas. It comes from their natural look and texture and the way they age so beautifully." Underneath is a range of couches priced from $795 to $3000. Sounds good, but the devil's in the detail. It's only when you click on the individual pieces it becomes clear that leather doesn't always mean leather. One couch is described as being covered in a "durable fabric that has the same look and feel as leather" and is actually not leather at all.

Another couch is listed as being upholstered in leather in the 'contact' areas, meaning the seat and back cushions are leather but the rest of the couch is covered in a mix of coated polyester and cotton. While the information is there if you know what to look for, it's buried deep in the product specifications and isn't particularly obvious.

Not so fantastic

In 2010 Fantastic Furniture were pulled up by the ACCC for "misleading or deceptive conduct" promoting its 'Eurohide' and 'Pellisima' couches as "the luxury of leather for less".

However, the couches were upholstered in "bonded leather". Bonded leather is made from



a mishmash of plastics and bits of leather glued together. The actual leather content in Fantastic Furniture's "bonded leather" was approximately 10%.

Furniture retailer Dare Gallery was also found to have engaged in 'false, misleading or deceptive conduct' at the same time by representing furniture as being "bonded leather" on their website, where users navigated to this description by clicking on the hyperlinks "See all leather sofas" or "See all leather sofa suites".

Graeme Samuel, ACCC chairman at the time, said consumers seek out and often pay a premium for leather goods.

"The ACCC will not tolerate traders in the furniture or any other industry misrepresenting predominantly synthetic materials as leather. If a trader chooses to use terms like 'leather' or 'hide' to describe goods that are only partially leather then they should also clearly disclose the fact it is not wholly leather to avoid consumer confusion."

Go for full-grain or top-grain leather, depending on your budget. Be wary of anything else

Sweating sofas

CHOICE member Vicki recently contacted us after the leather couches she had bought for almost $2000 began to peel and flake after about five years of use. She says that the material covering the armrests and back looked and felt different to the seats and back cushions. She says when she complained to the retailer, she was offered another couch at cost price. After speaking to CHOICE Help (see p15), she was given a full refund. She says she was told that while the original couch was actually all leather (not part vinyl as she suspected), it was of varying quality, and different types of leather had been used throughout.

Another CHOICE member, Robert (not his real name), has been in battle with a well-known retailer after the "genuine leather" couch he bought started peeling after just six months. He lodged a warranty claim, but after an assessment, was told that the problem wasn't covered by warranty because the couch had suffered from a build-up of sweat and excess body oils. He says he wiped down the couch weekly and in no way treated it differently to his other leather couch, which is in perfect condition despite being eight years old. Robert is still awaiting a repair on the newer couch, and still has questions about what it's actually made of.

According to Simmons, genuine leather kept under reasonable circumstances shouldn't peel: "A corrected-grain or genuine leather couch should not peel in most circumstances and definitely not in that [six-month] time frame. It could only possibly happen if the tanning process was extremely poor or it's not leather."

What to ask before you buy

CHOICE consumer law expert Meredith Cridland has helped several CHOICE members who have had problems with couches that were below the claimed quality. She recommends asking retailers these questions before buying:

- **"What type of leather is this lounge?"** Go for full-grain or top-grain leather, depending on your lifestyle and budget. Be wary of anything else, including split leather, bonded leather, pleather, faux leather, bicast, and synthetic leather.
- **"Is this leather used all over the lounge?"** A couch might have real leather on the seats and the tops of the armrests, but not on the back or the sides. These will deteriorate faster than the leather parts.
- **"How long is the warranty?** And what parts of the lounge are covered by the warranty?"

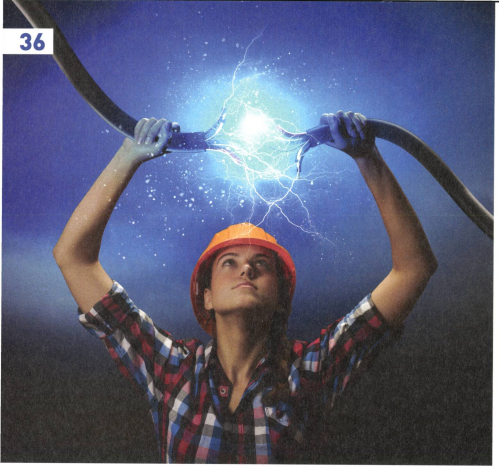
Get the answers in writing in case there are problems later. ■

Problem skin...

If you've been told that your couch is leather but it becomes clear that it's actually not, here's how to do something about it:

- **Go back to the business and tell them you don't think the lounge is leather. Show them detailed photos if you can.**
- **You may have a right to a refund or a replacement, depending on the extent of the problem.**
- **If the business won't help, you can contact your state or territory's Fair Trading office for more information, or contact the ACCC.**
- **If you're a CHOICE member, contact CHOICE Help (see p15) for advice and assistance.**

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK



Cable confusion

It could be a long wait for the NBN to get to your street, but when it does, you'll need to be prepared, says **Ros Page**

There are now just over half a million homes and businesses connected to the national broadband network (NBN), with eight million premises expected to be connected by 2020. But it hasn't been all smooth sailing so far.

We asked the Voice Your Choice community if they'd had any problems with their NBN installation and they reported experiences ranging from "seamless" to "a disaster".

Location of equipment

A fibre connection requires an 'NBN utility box' to be fixed to the outside of your premises, and an 'NBN connection box' installed inside that your computer, router and phone will be connected to. Customers are also offered a backup battery box for inside the premises.

Under the guidelines of nbn™ (the Commonwealth company set up to build and operate the national broadband network), an installer must offer several locations for installation of internal equipment. However, in practice, the home layout or location of internal routers or computers will influence where the equipment can go. This seems to be the biggest area of confusion and unhappiness for consumers.

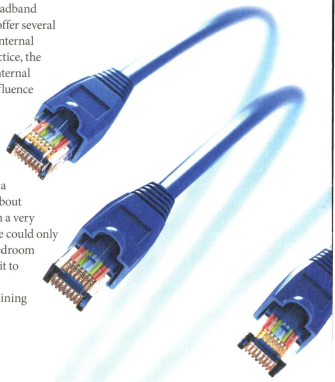
A member from WA with a fibre connection remarked about their connection box: "It is in a very inconvenient location, but we could only put it in a cupboard in the bedroom because they wouldn't allow it to go anywhere else."

It can be worthwhile explaining how or why you need the equipment in a certain location, as one Queensland member found during installation: "The installer eventually agreed to install the box where I wanted it."

Similarly, the location of the utility boxes on the outside of the home has caused some conflict. A member from Tasmania said: "We returned home one day to find the box on the outside wall of our house as we came up the drive and it's an eyesore. But we're getting used to it."

WHAT ARE YOUR NBN INSTALLATION RIGHTS?

- Standard installation is free.
- Standard installation allows a landline phone to plug into the NBN connection box.
- NBN fibre installation includes a utility box (external), standard connection box (internal) and optional (internal) battery backup.
- Existing phone sockets will no longer work, unless the wiring is changed at your cost.
- The installation location is determined by safety, existing hardware and property restrictions.



Tips for making the move to the NBN

- ✓ Find out your disconnection date as advised by nbn™.
- ✓ Read the information sent to you from nbn™ about the network changeover.
- ✓ Shop around and compare plans from service providers.
- ✓ Think about your preferred location for internal and external boxes and discuss with the ISP.
- ✓ For help with installation, go to nbn™; for help with plans, go to an ISP.
- ✓ Home security services may need to be upgraded, so check with your supplier.
- ✓ Add your medical alarm to the NBN register at nbn.com.au/medicalregister.

An NBN consumer connection kit with pictures of the equipment can be downloaded from nbnco.com.au/content/dam/nbnco2/documents/nbn-connect-kit.pdf.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has a guide at accc.gov.au/consumers/national-broadband-network.

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has a help sheet at accan.org.au/consumer-info/tip-sheets/nbn-switch-over.

Extra costs for installation

If you need additional work done to install the equipment, you'll probably have to pay for it yourself. A member from WA with a fibre connection had this problem: "We are waiting on an electrician to put in a data point and hard wire to a second storey, and I also have to change my alarm system – all this is going to cost us extra, which is annoying."

Slow wait times

Some members reported that it took longer than expected for the process to get started. One member in Queensland with a fibre connection told us: "It was a slow wait for the node box to be attached to the house once the initial rollout was in the street. Once an appointment was booked with nbn™ and our ISP (Optus), installation of the internal modem, battery back-up and transition from ADSL to NBN fibre was quick, seamless and speedy. Both nbn™ and Optus technicians were timely, efficient and friendly."

"It was impossible to get anyone to return calls while trying to sort out the installation and what plan to go on," said the fibre customer from WA. "In the end, I had the idea to go to our local Telstra business office, and finally I got someone who could look at our accounts and setup and tell us what to do. It was complex to fix, despite the fact that we are quite modest users of mobiles, landlines, fax, security and internet."

Do your research

If there's one takeaway from the stories of our Voice Your Choice members, it's to make sure you know what to expect, who to contact for plans and installation and what your rights are. As one member from the ACT (fibre connection) said: "I had no issues because I researched thoroughly before choosing a provider then supervised the installation of the internal and external hardware, insisting that everything be installed where and how I wanted it installed. I also assisted the technicians by pulling the fibre cable through my roof as they didn't want to do it. My provider had already sent my modem which I connected following their easy to use instructions and it was up and running in no time." ■

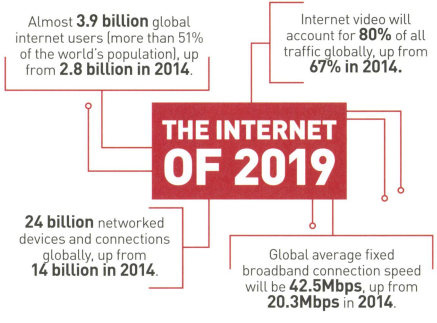

Almost 3.9 billion global internet users (more than 51% of the world's population), up from 2.8 billion in 2014.
Internet video will account for 80% of all traffic globally, up from 67% in 2014.
THE INTERNET OF 2019
24 billion networked devices and connections globally, up from 14 billion in 2014.
Global average fixed broadband connection speed will be 42.5Mbps, up from 20.3Mbps in 2014.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Duty of disclosure

The insurance industry says it's committed to better disclosure documents. **Andy Kollmorgen** explores how it could actually get it right

Despite numerous attempts to make insurance documents clearer over the years, the fine print continues to defy comprehension. A new effort is currently underway courtesy of the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA), which represents the interests of insurance companies but says it's also committed to helping consumers understand what they are and aren't covered for.

The current disclosure rules were established in 2001, and since then there's been a growing realisation that long and dense documents don't really work for consumers. Refinements to the regimen along the way haven't quite solved the problem.

Who you gonna call?

On the recommendation of the government's recent Financial System Inquiry, there's a new team on the job. A taskforce made up of representatives from insurance companies IAG, QBE and Suncorp and other concerned parties (and chaired by veteran insurance lawyer Michael Gill) was formed in early July and is due to deliver its findings to the ICA board in November. So what can consumers expect the Effective Disclosure Taskforce to achieve?

Required reading?

We heard back from 480 CHOICE members when we asked our Voice Your Choice community whether consumers read and understand Product Disclosure Statements. Nearly a third of respondents said they don't read them, and 78% of that group said it's because they're too long and difficult to understand.

Of those who do read PDS docs, only 15% said they read them in full, and 27% don't read them when choosing which policy to buy. Less than 1% of respondents said PDS docs were "very easy to understand", while 67% said they were "difficult to understand".

"I am currently looking at renewing my house and contents insurance," one member told us. "I received a renewal document from Suncorp with a Fact Sheet stating that I am covered for 'fire and explosion', but then the document states that I have 'no cover for loss or damage for arcing'. I am also covered for 'lightning' but the document states that there is 'no cover due to loss or damage caused by power failure or surges by your power provider'. In other words, it is as clear to me as mud!"

That remains to be seen, but early indications are that the group genuinely wants to make insurance documents easier to read and understand. That's a good thing, since the home insurance product disclosure documents we recently trawled through from AAMI and Suncorp (both Suncorp brands) and NRMA (an IAG brand) left even our experts a bit dazed and confused – and we read these things all the time. NRMA's and Suncorp's both clocked in at about 84 pages (depending on whether you count section intros and the like), while AAMI's was about 60 pages long.

Some documents left even our experts a bit dazed and confused

In announcing the new taskforce, ICA CEO Rob Whelan made the point that insurers are required by law to provide "highly detailed" disclosure documents, but he also acknowledged that the insurance industry, governments and consumer groups "all perceive the current disclosure regimen as being lengthy, often complex and not always helpful in ensuring [that] consumers understand the product they are buying".

A word from the chair

Taskforce chair Michael Gill, who has also served as the independent chair of the General Insurance Code Compliance Committee, told CHOICE the road to making insurance documents easier to understand in Australia has been rocky – not least because getting consumers to read insurance documents of any kind can be a tall order.

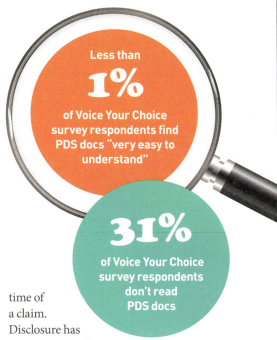
"My practice as an insurance lawyer often involves disputes about the meaning of words and provisions in insurance policies, both commercial insurance and domestic insurance," Gill says. "I often describe the challenge as closing the expectation gap between what the consumer thought they purchased and what happens at the time of a claim. Disclosure has an important role, but it is only part of it."

Just the facts, please

As of November last year, home insurance documents have been required to include a Key Facts Sheet that outlines the main features of the policy in plain English – but only if you ask for it, or for further info about the policy in general.

Taskforce chair Michael Gill says Key Facts Sheets "are the last in a long line of efforts commencing with standard cover definitions in the Insurance Contracts Act, plain language modification and product disclosure statements. All of these changes were intended to better educate consumers, to make wordings that were easier for them to understand, and ultimately to bring more certainty to the buying process. I don't know if any of these things have succeeded, and if so, to what extent. In the meantime, the industry spends tens of millions of dollars complying and consumers seem to remain as confused as they were before."

The ICA's Campbell Fuller said research has yet to be undertaken to determine if Key Facts Sheets are making things clearer for consumers, but added that "research in Australia and internationally shows small differences in short-form disclosure can make a significant difference in how useful that disclosure is to users".


Less than
1%
of Voice Your Choice survey respondents find PDS docs "very easy to understand"
31%
of Voice Your Choice survey respondents don't read PDS docs

Gill also points out that oversimplification isn't the answer. "The amazing array of factual circumstances that can give rise to a claim clearly means that we are often dealing with complex scenarios," he says. "It would be nice to think there are simple answers. Australia is yet to find them, and we have been looking for a long time."

The ICA's general manager communications and media relations, Campbell Fuller, struck a similar theme, but says there's now reason to be hopeful that a fresh look will make a difference.

"Producing succinct disclosure documents that comprehensively inform consumers about a policy is not a straightforward task," says Fuller. "The varied needs of consumers, coupled with the infinite number of scenarios where a claim may possibly be made, makes disclosure a complex exercise."

But Fuller admits asking consumers to pore over every word of a mind-numbing document may be unrealistic. "Comprehensive policy information, though important when a consumer needs to make a claim, may not be useful or wanted by all consumers when they are shopping around for policies."

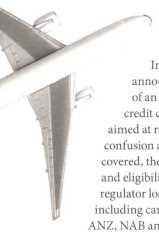
And this time around, the goal of ▸

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

achieving better disclosure will be aided by some new tools, including social media, interactive documents and "fresh

"It would be nice to think there are simple answers. Australia is yet to find them"

insights into individual decision-making and how communications could be designed to lead to the best outcomes for consumers" that have come from the growing field of behavioural sciences.



Improving travel insurance

In June this year, ASIC announced the outcome of an investigation into credit card travel insurance aimed at relieving consumer confusion about who was covered, the extent of exclusions, and eligibility requirements. The regulator looked at 17 brands, including cards offered by CBA, ANZ, NAB and Westpac, and convinced the credit card issuers and their insurers to make some much-needed improvements. These were to:

- clarify when the insurance cover is 'activated,' particularly where a minimum spend threshold needs to be met to activate the insurance cover
- clarify if and when the use of reward points to pay for travel costs will activate the insurance cover
- clarify whether supplementary cardholders can benefit from the policy
- provide clearer and more prominent information about the documentation required to make a claim.

Credit card issuers who weren't already doing so also agreed to provide direct, easy-to-find links to travel insurance terms and conditions on their websites.

Following the investigation, ASIC deputy chair Peter Kell echoed the concerns of the many confused consumers who had been in touch with ASIC and the Financial Ombudsman Service about unclear disclosure, saying "credit card issuers and insurers must clearly set out what is and what is not covered by a policy, so that consumers can work out if they are adequately covered". ■

Different words, same meaning?

CHOICE is no stranger to the lack of standardised terms in insurance contracts – something we contend with regularly in preparing our market-wide compare-and-review reports. And we campaigned hard for a single definition of "flood" across all home insurance disclosure statements, a measure that came into effect in July 2014 after catastrophic floods in Queensland and NSW in 2011 revealed widespread homeowner confusion about whether they had flood cover or not.

While there is general uniformity in home insurance documents these days, home insurers sometimes use different words to describe the same or similar things – only adding to the confusion. A couple of examples:

ACTIONS OF THE SEA Home insurers use different combinations of terms including tsunami, storm surge, high tide and tidal wave, making it hard to know exactly what's covered when comparing one disclosure statement to another.

DAMAGE BY ANIMALS Some PDS docs say the policy covers "impact damage by animals, excluding pets or animals owned by you", while others say the cover is limited to "accidental damage only, excludes biting, chewing or scratching". The language appears to describe the same event, but it's hard to be sure.

High flyers

With credit cards less rewarding than ever, **Uta Mihm** tracks down the best and worst flight rewards cards

When you first picked up that shiny new 'Platinum' frequent flyer credit card, did you dream of a holiday on a tropical Island, with flights and perks paid for by the points you earned? Such dreams are easily dashed, as credit cards become less rewarding than ever.

Most credit cards promising travel rewards are loaded with high fees, and those fees can really eat up any benefits you might get, particularly if point caps and expiry dates stop you from earning or using your points. But it's not all doom and gloom: we surveyed 117 flight rewards cards on the data research company Mozo's database, and found there are still some good cards out there.

Cards for high flyers

Along with high fees, travel rewards cards also have high interest rates, especially for cash advances. If you're not sure you'll always pay your balance in full, go for a credit card with a low interest rate instead. And don't fall for a low balance transfer offer from a travel reward card provider – the rate is unlikely to stay low.

With most loyalty cards you'll need to spend at least $2000 per month to get any value, but there are a few travel cards that can suit low spenders:

- American Express Velocity Escape
- American Express Qantas Discovery

Both these cards have a $0 annual fee, no point caps and no point expiry dates. They earn you one point per dollar spent, which is a lower rate than other American Express (Amex) cards, but because of their low fees they are still top cards for low spenders all the way up to high flyers who spend $5000 per month.

But the trouble with Amex cards is that many shops hit you up with surcharges for using one, or they don't accept them at all. Any surcharge is likely to eat up the rewards on offer. You can, however, use them at supermarkets – which don't generally surcharge – and so use your weekly grocery shop to collect points.

Virgin Money's Virgin Australia Velocity Flyer Visa card is another good card for low spenders, says Peter Marshall, data research manager at Mozo. If you spend $1000 a month, it can return rewards worth up to $108 per year after the $129 annual fee is taken into account. Not exactly a windfall, but ▸

$164

Average annual fee of the 117 travel rewards cards on the Mozo database. The highest annual fee – $700.

19.7%

Average interest rate for purchases on travel rewards cards. Rates for cash advances and expired balance transfers can rise to nearly 30%.

IMAGE: ISTOCK

at least you come out ahead on a modest monthly spend, which isn't often the case.

Travel perks

Another perk with the Virgin card is "four free flights", though that offer's a bit wobbly. "Virgin Money's free flights offer is good, but you need to be aware that it is really a 'two for one' deal where you get 50% off when booking the same flight for two people," says Marshall. "The discount only applies to the base price, so excludes all taxes and surcharges. Plus the flights can't be booked online, and the booking must be made at least 30 days in advance."

Other cards come with perks such as airport lounge passes, chauffeur-driven rides to the airport, free accommodation and flights. But as with the Virgin offer, conditions often apply – so it pays to read the fine print, check the annual fee and understand what's really on offer.

And before getting a frequent flyer rewards card, make sure you'll actually be able to use your points – but that's a whole other story (see *CHOICE*, Apr 15).

Top 25 cards if you spend $5000 per month

Some of the cards that made the Top 25 for people who spend $2000 per month on their credit card are also a top card for people who spend $5000 per month (see table on opposite page). These are the best cards if you spend any amount in between, or have some months where you spend less than others. For the full results go to choice.com.au/flightrewards.

1	**American Express** Velocity Escape
2	**ANZ** Rewards Platinum Visa/American Express (Velocity)
3	**American Express** Qantas Discovery
4	**Virgin Money** Virgin Australia Velocity High Flyer Visa
5	**HSBC** Premier World MasterCard (Qantas)
6	**ANZ** Rewards Black Visa/American Express (Velocity)
7	**NAB** Velocity Rewards Premium Visa/American Express
8	**Jetstar** Platinum MasterCard (Qantas)
9	**American Express** Platinum Edge (Velocity)
10	**ANZ** Rewards Visa/American Express (Velocity)
11	**Bankmecu** Platinum Rewards Visa (Qantas)
12	**HSBC** Platinum Qantas Visa
13	**Suncorp** Platinum Clear Options Visa (Qantas)
14	**American Express** Qantas Premium
15	**G&C Mutual Bank** Platinum Visa (Qantas)
16	**Macquarie** Visa Platinum (Qantas)
17	**NAB** Qantas Rewards Premium Visa/American Express
18	**CBA** Diamond Awards MasterCard/American Express (Velocity)
19	**Citibank** Citi Signature Visa (Velocity)
20	**ANZ** Frequent Flyer Platinum Visa/American Express (Qantas)
21	**NAB** Velocity Rewards Visa/American Express
22	**CBA** Diamond Awards MasterCard/American Express (Qantas)
23	**Westpac** Altitude Black MasterCard/American Express (Velocity)
24	**ANZ** Frequent Flyer Black Visa/Amex (Qantas)
25	**American Express** Velocity Platinum

Card flops

There are a number of cards that charge such high fees or give back so little that you actually come out behind once you deduct your annual fee from the rewards. Of course, some cards with high fees may offer other benefits such as a concierge or insurance, which may make them worthwhile if you use those services.

Flops for $2000 monthly spending

- Citibank Citi Prestige Visa – Qantas, $700 annual fee
- Citibank Emirates World MasterCard, $299 annual fee
- Macquarie Hilton HHonors Platinum Visa – Qantas, $295 annual fee
- Citibank Citi Prestige Visa – Velocity, $700 annual fee
- David Jones American Express Platinum – Velocity, $295 annual fee

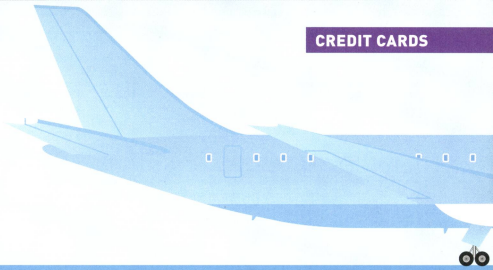
Flops for $5000 monthly spending

- Macquarie Hilton HHonors Platinum Visa – Qantas, $295 annual fee

Other cards leave you worse off if you want to use them for international travel – your points will likely expire before you've banked enough to book flights. With the banks that offer a Visa or MasterCard and an additional Amex on the same rewards account, the Visa and MasterCard normally earns fewer rewards points, so you may lose out if that's the one you use. The cards above leave you in the negative for all options once you deduct the annual fee from the rewards. ■

$477

How much worse off you'll be after paying the $700 annual fee, if you want to use your Citibank Citi Prestige Visa reward points for a Qantas Sydney–London return flight, based on a $2000 monthly spend.



Top 25 frequent flyer rewards cards for $2000 monthly spending on card*

	Financial institution	Card	Interest rate (%)	Cash advance rate (%)	Annual fee ($)	Frequent flyer program	American Express ($) value of points earned in a year if used for the following flights**		Visa/MasterCard ($) value of points earned in a year if used for the following flights**		In Top 25 for $5000 monthly spending***
							Syd–Mel	Syd–London	Syd–Mel	Syd–London	
1	**American Express**	Velocity Escape	20.74	(A)	0	Velocity	473	278			Yes
2	**American Express**	Qantas Discovery	20.74	(A)	0	Qantas	453	272			Yes
3	**Jetstar**	Platinum MasterCard (Jetstar vouchers)	19.99	21.99	149	Jetstar			331	not offered	
4	**HSBC**	Premier World MasterCard (Qantas)	19.99	21.99	99	Qantas			354	173	Yes
5	**Woolworths Money**	Qantas Platinum Visa	20.49	21.99	139	Qantas			314	133	
6	**Jetstar**	Platinum MasterCard (Qantas)	19.99	21.99	149	Qantas			304	123	Yes
7	**Virgin Money**	Virgin Australia Velocity Flyer Visa	20.74	20.99	129	Velocity			285	115	
8	**NAB**	Velocity Rewards Visa/Amex	19.99	21.74	95	Velocity	378	183	142	44	Yes
9	**Westpac**	Altitude Visa/Amex (Velocity)	20.24	21.24	100	Velocity	373	178	137	39	
10	**American Express**	Platinum Edge (Velocity)	20.74	(A)	195	Velocity	278	83			Yes
11	**Virgin Money**	Virgin Australia Velocity High Flyer Visa	20.74	20.99	289	Velocity			302	59	Yes
12	**ANZ**	Frequent Flyer Visa/Amex (Qantas)	19.99	21.49	95	Qantas	358	177	132	41	
13	**NAB**	Qantas Rewards MasterCard/Amex	19.99	21.74	95	Qantas	358	177	132	41	
14	**Bankmecu**	Platinum Rewards Visa (Qantas)	18.74	18.74	189	Qantas			264	83	Yes
15	**David Jones**	American Express (Qantas)	20.74	(A)	99	Qantas	241	105			
16	**Westpac**	Altitude Visa/Amex (Qantas)	20.24	21.24	100	Qantas	353	172	127	36	
17	**HSBC**	Platinum Qantas Visa	19.99	21.99	199	Qantas			254	73	Yes
18	**Bank of Queensland**	Platinum Visa	20.74	21.74	99	Vouchers (C)			216	87	
19	**Suncorp**	Platinum Clear Options Visa (Qantas)	20.74	21.99	218	Qantas			235	54	Yes
20	**CBA**	Awards MasterCard/Amex (Velocity)	20.24	21.24	69 (B)	Velocity	225	108	130	52	
21	**American Express**	Qantas Premium	20.74	(A)	249	Qantas	204	23			Yes
22	**G&C Mutual Bank**	Platinum Visa (Qantas)	18.99	19.99	249	Qantas			204	23	Yes
23	**Macquarie**	Visa Platinum (Qantas)	20.7	21.95	200	Qantas			203	22	Yes
24	**Bankwest**	Qantas Platinum MasterCard	20.49	21.99	160	Qantas			180	44	
25	**Bank of Melbourne, Bank SA, St George**	Amplify Classic Visa (Velocity)	19.49	20.74	79	Velocity			158	60	

Source: Card data and $ returns by mozo.com.au. Ranking by CHOICE.

TABLE NOTES * Cards ranked by average total value over year (after annual fee) for $ towards Sydney–London and Sydney–Melbourne return flights excluding taxes. Flight values set by Mozo. Sydney–Melbourne: Qantas $151; Virgin $136; Jetstar $104. All Sydney–London: $1450. ** Visa/MasterCards with an additional American Express card are listed in the American Express columns for 100% spending on the American Express card, and in the Visa/MasterCard columns for 100% spending on the Visa or MasterCard. Results for both cards were averaged for the ranking. *** For the full list of Top 25 card for $5000 monthly spending see table at left, and for their full results see choice.com.au/flightrewards. **(A)** American Express cards don't allow cash advances. **(B)** Includes $10 rewards program annual fee. **(C)** Virgin Australia, Flight Centre or Take Flight vouchers.

IMAGES: ISTOCK AND SHUTTERSTOCK

Ask the Experts

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

Q We have our first baby on the way and I'm struggling to understand the difference between prams and strollers. And when your review says "suitable for newborns" does that mean the seat goes flat so the baby can lie down? Or does it mean the stroller can be fitted with a bassinet? In the buying guide, three-wheel strollers are said to be heavier, bulkier and less stable than four-wheelers, but you've recommended a three-wheeler.

Chris Barnes

A CHOICE household team leader Chris Barnes replies: Prams and strollers are generally interchangeable terms, but pram is sometimes used to mean a model that allows the child (typically an infant) to lie down, whereas stroller usually means a model where the child is mainly in a sitting-up position. "Suitable for newborns" does indeed mean the seat can be laid flat so the child can sleep. We mention where the model requires an optional bassinet for this.

Three-wheelers can tend to be bigger and bulkier and less stable, but that doesn't mean they can't be recommended – not all are bulky or unstable, and for some people the size isn't an issue anyway. Our recommendations are based on safety and durability – we find that members prefer to make their own call on other aspects such as size or features.

Q Is there a general rule of thumb as to when to replace a refrigerator, given advances in technology and potential decrease in performance with age?

Matthew Steen

A CHOICE whitegoods team leader Matthew Steen replies: There's no general rule, but if your fridge is over 10 years old you'll find there's been some good energy improvements in that time. This is largely due to the Energy Rating Progam – better star ratings result in better sales, so manufacturers have had to improve fridge technology.

If you have a very old fridge (10 to 30 years) it's worth looking at a new one just for the energy improvements. However, you should measure this against the purchase cost and undoubted energy price rises in future. Use a power meter to measure a minute's worth of energy use, and calculate what it will use over a year, or 10 – you can then compare that to an equivalent-sized fridge on the market now.

Ask us!

Do you have a question for one of CHOICE's experts? Email us at **asktheexperts@choice.com.au** or write to us at:
Ask the Experts, CHOICE,
57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204.
We regret that we cannot reply to all correspondence.

COMPILED BY RACHEL HYNES

Q We recently bought a packet of dried vermicelli noodles, AKA glass noodles. When we cooked some of them, they had a chemical-like smell. How do we go about having what's left tested? We'd like to find out if there's a substance in it that shouldn't be there.

A CHOICE senior journalist Rachel Clemons replies: First, contact the food manufacturer to let them know about your experience, as it's in their best interest to investigate. Contact details should be printed on the product packaging.

You could also get in touch with the relevant food enforcement contact in the state or area where the food is produced (or imported to). FSANZ, our national food regulator, publishes the list of contacts by state or territory at foodstandards.gov.au/about/foodenforcementcontacts. This is often the local council, where you'll need to ask for the Environmental Health Officer. They can investigate the matter and run tests if necessary, at no cost to you. Please keep us updated.

Tests

Two different coffee categories, two tests of dual-powered products, and an old favourite returns...

46 Automatic espresso machines
Coffee you can make when you're only half awake

50 Dual-fuel ranges
Freestanding stoves to take pride of place in your kitchen

55 Portable air conditioners
Keep your cool (without the commitment)

58 Laundry balls
You'd be nuts to ditch your detergent for these

60 Tablets
Take one of these slim new screens – and ditch the laptop

63 Dual SIM smartphones
Pair up your SIM cards to pare down your tech

66 Turntables
Drop the needle on today's sleekest mid-priced models

72 Honda HRV
CHOICE testers and a staffer's young family take to the road

73 Portable espresso machines
Give "coffee to go" a whole new meaning with these handheld brewing gadgets

From grinding the beans to frothing the milk – all the hard work is done for you, on p46

Our expert panel sipped dozens of cuppas to tell us how automatic coffee machines stack up

CHOICE

CHOICE'S experienced technical staff puts products through their paces in our own testing laboratories. We use test methods based on Australian standards and develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, maintaining our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. We've checked the models are available at the time we publish. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE Shopper
Members who have subscribed to CHOICE through our website have access to the best deals on products wherever this logo appears. Simply have your CHOICE membership number on hand, the model name and number, and the price you have been quoted. Phone 1300 360 655 and we'll source you the best deal.

CHOICE Online
For more related information and articles on this topic, go to **choice.com.au**

CHOICE Best Buy
Our testers award a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report includes Best Buys.

CHOICE Green Buy
Our researchers award a Green Buy to a product that delivers good quality and environmental performance. Not every test report includes Green Buys.

Easing the daily grind

Automatic espresso machines are easy to use but many don't deliver consistently good coffee, says Chris Barnes

Nutshell

- Automatic espresso machines can cost a lot, and don't always deliver great coffee.
- We've tested 10 new machines, but none make it to our recommended list.

With convenient and affordable capsule coffee machines becoming ever more popular, is there still a place for the fully automatic espresso machine?

The answer is yes; while capsule machines make up the great majority of coffee machines sold in Australia, the market share for automatic espresso machines has actually grown a little since we last tested them in 2013. While these machines are generally much more expensive than manual or semi-automatic models, there's clearly a definite appeal in a machine that freshly grinds the beans each time, makes the espresso and heats and even froths the milk, all at the press of a button.

Unfortunately, our test shows that many can't be relied upon to make a good espresso first time, every time. We find some machines aren't properly warmed up for the first coffee they make (despite the machine indicating it's ready), resulting in an under-extracted, weaker flavour. This usually improves if you make more coffees immediately after, as the machine warms up more. Models with good scores for both taste and temperature consistency can be relied on to make a good espresso shot every time.

Many Australians prefer milk-based coffees such as flat whites, cappuccinos and lattes; for these, the espresso flavour is slightly less important as it's somewhat masked by the milk. This is where an automatic machine can make life easy; they might not match the silky milk foam that a top barista can make, but they can still deliver a foam good enough to please most coffee drinkers. Look for models with a good milk frothing score in the table (right).

Delonghi Magnifica S ECAM22110SB
- **DeLonghi** Latte Crema System Silver Compact ECAM234
- **DeLonghi** Eletta Cappuccino Top ECAM45760B

Gaggia Accademia RI970203
- **Jura** F9 Piano Black
- **DeLonghi** Prima Donna XS De Luxe ETAM36365M
- **Saeco** Intelia Class Evo HD8752/94
- **Jura** Impressa A5 Platinum
- **Miele** CM 6300

Saeco Exprelia Evo HD8857/03

Saeco Intelia Class Met HD8752/25

Jura Ena Micro 1 Aroma +
- **Jura** J90 Brilliant Silver
- **Gaggia** Milano Brera RI9305/01
- **Kogan** Automatic Espresso Coffee Machine KACOFAUTE

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of July 2015. **Scores** The
TABLE NOTES • Newly tested. **V** Variable (no fixed settings).

WHAT TO BUY

None of the newly tested models make our recommended list. See About the Rest on p48 for details.

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

80% Delonghi Magnifica S ECAM22110SB (Sep 13) $799

HOW WE TEST

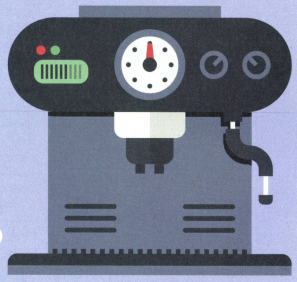
Preparation Our tester first flushes each machine with a litre of water to remove any factory smells and tastes, then makes 20 to 25 shots of espresso. This conditions the machine and helps him adjust the grinder to the correct setting for the coffee we use.

Ease of use Our tester checks how easy the machines are to use by trying the controls, filling the water tank and the bean hopper, adjusting the grinder, making a coffee and cleaning inside and out, and checks how easy they are to program.

Frothing He experiments to find the best way to froth milk on each machine, looking for fine, pourable froth.

Coffee temperature consistency He measures the consistency of four consecutive coffees for each machine after warming it up for at least five minutes (longer if required).

Taste See Meet the Experts, p48.



PERFORMANCE					FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS				
Overall score (%)	Taste test score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Milk frothing score (%)	Coffee temperature consistency score (%)	Auto on / Auto off / Standby	Cord storage	Cup warming plate	Coffee strength settings	Milk frothing	Digital display	Warm-up time measured (min:sec)	H x W x D (cm)	Weight (kg)	Origin	Contact
80	85	69	80	70	-/✓/✓		✓	V	Manual	✓	1:10	35 x 24 x 43	9.0	Italy	delonghi.com.au
68	70	75	65	20	✓/✓/✓		✓	5	Auto	✓	1:00	35 x 24 x 44	10.1	Italy	delonghi.com.au
67	70	76	60	20	✓/✓/✓		✓	5	Auto	✓	1:10	36 x 26 x 46	11.7	Italy	delonghi.com.au
67	70	77	50	40	✓/-/✓		✓	3	Manual / auto	✓	1:25	39 x 28 x 43	16.7	Italy	segafredo.com.au
65	65	74	70	10	-/✓/✓	✓		8	Auto	✓	0:50	35 x 28 x 44	10.1	Switzerland	au.jura.com
62	55	79	70	50	✓/✓/✓		✓	5	Auto	✓	1:00	33 x 20 x 47	11.1	Italy	delonghi.com.au
62	60	72	60	50	-/✓/-		✓	3	Semi-auto	✓	1:00	35 x 26 x 46	8.2	Romania	saeco.com.au
59	55	79	65	10	-/✓/✓			2	Auto	✓	0:45	32 x 23 x 45	10.0	Portugal	au.jura.com
58	50	84	65	30	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	7	Auto	✓	1:00	36 x 25 x 43	9.9	Switzerland	miele.com.au
58	55	79	50	30	-/-/✓			3	Manual / auto	✓	1:20	37 x 25 x 42	13.6	Italy	saeco.com.au
55	55	76	40	10	-/-/✓			5	Manual	✓	1:00	35 x 26 x 44	8.7	Romania	saeco.com.au
54	45	73	60	60	-/✓/✓			2	Separate jug		0:45	33 x 23 x 45	8.6	Portugal	au.jura.com
53	40	75	65	80	-/✓/✓	✓		5	Auto	✓	1:00	34 x 29 x 42	11.0	Switzerland	au.jura.com
52	45	69	60	50	-/-/✓		✓	3	Manual	✓	1:05	32 x 26 x 44	8.5	Romania	segafredo.com.au
45	35	71	65	10	-/✓/✓		✓	4	Auto	✓	1:25	36 x 27 x 41	10.5	China	kogan.com.au

ll score is made up of taste test (60%), ease of use (20%), milk frothing (15%), and coffee temperature consistency (5%). **Warm-up time** The time taken to heat the machine to operating temperature (not scored).

About the rest

Most of the newly tested models are easy to use; very easy, in the case of the **Miele**, though the **Gaggia** is only OK due to its grinder being hard to operate. Most are at least OK for frothing. Each was let down by its taste test and/or temperature consistency; several are very poor for the latter, which is disappointing for such pricey machines. See the table [p46-7] for their individual scores.

MEET THE EXPERTS:

David and Matthew Gee from Barista Basics, and Anee Sampath of Samson Coffee House and BeanCraft roasters.

Matthew Gee

David Gee

Anee Sampath

Our taste panel test the coffees in a 'blind' tasting, checking the quality of the crema (the tan foam on top of an espresso), aroma, flavour, mouthfeel (e.g. creamy, watery) and aftertaste. We also use two control machines to maintain consistency between tests. Each tester gets one full espresso shot from each machine, made by our in-house tester Peter Horvath. Peter discards the first shot from each machine; the test is based on subsequent shots. He uses freshly roasted premium beans from a major local supplier to give the machines their best chance to make top-notch espresso.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Clear and simple controls Digital displays are generally easier to understand than indicator lights.

Cup warming plate Can help stop the coffee cooling down too quickly. Higher scoring models in this test have this feature.

Removable froth enhancer Some machines come with a froth enhancer on the milk frothing wand. This is intended to make frothing easier, but often it produces large bubbles rather than the fine foam that's suitable for latte and cappuccino. If you can remove the enhancer you may find it easier to produce fine, velvety foam.

Variable coffee strength Lets you adjust the intensity of the coffee to your taste.

Adjustable grinder Lets you adjust the grind to suit the beans and the machine. Check the grinder mechanism is easily accessible. All models tested have an adjustable grinder.

Automatic on/off/standby Lets you set a time for the machine to automatically turn on (for example, to warm up for your morning coffee); to switch off when unused for a certain period; and enter an energy-saving mode, where it stops warming but otherwise remains on.

Footprint If you have limited bench space in your kitchen, look for a machine that takes up less space.

Milk frothing Frothing may be **automatic**, which froths and dispenses milk when you select a coffee type such as a cappuccino; **semi-automatic**, where you press a button to start the frothing and dispensing, and press it again to stop; or **manual**, where you use the frothing wand to froth the milk yourself. Some models have a **separate jug** or milk frother accessory.

Double shot Many models can make two espressos at once, but often they just grind one dose of beans for this, usually about the same amount they'd make for a single cup, leading to weaker coffee. If you often make two cups, look for models (such as the Miele, Saeco, Gaggia and Jura Impressa A5 Platinum models in this test) that make them in quick succession rather than simultaneously; these models grind a fresh dose for each cup, which is the best way.

All the tested models have a **water tank empty** reminder, **height adjustable spout** to accommodate taller cups and **programmable coffee quantity**. ■

choice

Spring fever

Pack away the winter woollies and get ready for spring with our buying guides and articles

Around the garden

Lawnmowers
choice.com.au/lawnmowers

Whipper snippers
choice.com.au/whippersnippers

Retractable hoses
choice.com.au/hoses

Pressure cleaners
choice.com.au/pressurecleaners

Around the home

Vacuum cleaners
choice.com.au/vacuumcleaners

Steam mops
choice.com.au/steammops

Carpet cleaning
choice.com.au/carpetcleaning

Getting rid of mould
choice.com.au/mould

Nutshell

- We've tested nine new 60cm dual-fuel ranges priced from $1199 to $2499.
- A freestanding range is often a large and solid appliance that can become the centrepiece of the kitchen.

Standing proud

If you're strapped for space, a 60cm dual-fuel range (an electric oven with gas cooktop) might be just what you're looking for, says **Rebecca Ciaramidaro**

A freestanding oven can be a huge investment, and with so many options available, how do you make the right choice? In the past we've said that you'll get better performance from a separate built-in electric oven and gas cooktop – and have more options when it comes to your kitchen layout – but if you've got the space, you're a passionate home cook or you do a lot of entertaining then the impressive 90cm freestanding ovens are an option to consider. Whether in sleek stainless steel or increasingly popular enamel, these appliances will be a talking point in your kitchen.

But if you're short on space you might want to look at a 60cm option. They may not be as show-stopping as their bigger cousins but you still get that freestanding look. Our home economist Fiona Mair has tested nine new 60cm freestanding dual fuel ovens, and we've combined the results with previously tested 90cm dual fuel ranges.

We recommend one model from this current batch: the **Bosch HGV74W355A** has impressive performance and ease of use scores. If you're just after something basic (and under $2000) then the **Westinghouse WFE619SA** is worth considering. It's mainly let down by its low score in our pizza test. The oven only has a fan-forced function with a separate grill area (that requires you to leave the door open when grilling). The lack of a bottom element meant that the pizza base wasn't cooked very well, so if you do a lot of this type of cooking you might be disappointed.

WHAT TO BUY

80%

Bosch HGV74W355A

Good points

- Child lock on oven controls
- Excellent visibility through the door
- Can view the food cooking under the grill on the top shelf
- Can view control functions from a standing position
- Comprehensive instructions
- Shield in front of the grill element protects hands from accidental burns
- Excellent coverage of catalytic liners
- Door and glass can be removed for easy cleaning
- Slide out storage compartment for trays and accessories
- Smokeless grill tray
- Very good layout of burners with wok trivet supplied
- Cast iron trivets have a fairly smooth finish for easier cleaning
- Burner surround is moulded and easy to clean. All burners have a raised edge so liquid spills are less likely to run into workings

Bad points

- No fan assist or warm mode
- Grill element doesn't drop down for easy cleaning of the oven ceiling
- There is restricted access to some burners when in use due to proximity to other burners
- Labelling is bonded and may scratch off or fade after prolonged cleaning
- Controls can be easily accessed by children – the controls are positioned at the front, below the cooktop

About the rest

All the rest have oven doors that can be removed for cleaning, and the **Westinghouse WFE619SA, Fisher & Paykel OR60SDBGFX2, DeLonghi DEF608GW** and **Smeg C6GMXA8** have removable glass. They all have very good burner layout on the cooktop. All except the **DeLonghi** have bonded labelling, which may scratch or fade.

The **Fisher & Paykel** has good visibility through the door but it's difficult to view food cooking under the grill. The grill element can be lowered for cleaning. Wok and small pot trivets are provided for the cooktop.

The **Westinghouse** has good visibility through the door and the grill element has a protective shield, but the grill element doesn't lower.

The **DeLonghi** has good visibility through the door. It has a recessed shelf to accommodate taller dishes. There's no protective shield for the grill element and the element doesn't lower. Wok and small pot trivets are provided. However, the burner surrounds are aluminium and can stain easily.

The **Technika TEG64U** has good visibility but the door is very stiff to open and close. The grill element has a protective shield, but the element doesn't drop down. A wok trivet is provided.

The **Smeg** has only OK visibility. It's difficult to view food cooking under the grill, there's no protective shield, and the grill element doesn't drop down. Wok and small pot trivets are provided but the burner surrounds are aluminium and can easily stain.

The **Beko CSM 81320 DX** has good visibility, but there's no protective shield for the grill element and the element doesn't drop down. There's a child lock for the oven controls; however, the oven controls aren't grouped together and the on/preheat indicator is small. A wok trivet is provided. The cast iron trivets are fairly heavy with a slightly rough surface, making them harder to clean.

The **Euromaid GTEOS60** has good visibility, but there's no protective shield for the grill element and the element doesn't lower. The oven controls aren't grouped together and the on/preheat indicator is small. A wok trivet is provided. This model has a separate cooktop ignition button, which you'll need to hold to ignite the gas burners.

The **Ariston A6TMC2 X AUS** has very good visibility. The grill element has a protective shield but the oven door needs to be left open when grilling. The grill element doesn't lower and there's no separate grill tray. There are no safety stoppers to prevent the grill/baking tray from being pulled right out and the tray tilts slightly. The cast iron trivets are fairly heavy with a slightly rough surface so cleaning them is difficult. The controls have limited grip with no crossbar.

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

79% Fisher & Paykel OR90SDBGFX3
$3699 (Oct 14)
79% Westinghouse WFE914SA
$2299 (Oct 14)

(Month and year refers to *CHOICE* issue in which the model was profiled)

How we test

Cooktop performance CHOICE's home economist Fiona Mair assesses how well the cooktops can melt chocolate and cook a white sauce on a low heat setting; their control responsiveness and turn-down ability, by cooking rice using the absorption method; and their high heat setting, with a vegetable and beef stir fry.

OVEN PERFORMANCE

- **Multi-shelf cooking** Scones are baked on two shelves to test how evenly the ovens cook at a high temperature over a short time.
- **Low temperature** Meringues are baked to assess cooking ability at a low temperature for a long period.
- **Roasting** Fiona roasts a whole chicken

			PERFORMANCE														FEATURES						
	Price ($)	Oven running costs ($, 3h/week over 10 years)	Overall score (%)	Oven performance (%)	Cooktop performance (%)	Oven ease of use (%)	Cooktop ease of use (%)	Grilling toast (%)	Scones (%)	Meringues (%)	Roast chicken (%)	Pizza (%)	Rice (%)	White sauce (%)	Stir-frying (%)	Catalytic liners	Telescopic runners	Smokeless grill tray	Storage compartment	Clock	Timer	Fan grill
90CM DUAL FUEL RANGES																							
Fisher & Paykel OR90SDBGFX3 (A)	3699	408	79	89	86	71	70	75	83	100	100	85	65	85	95	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Westinghouse WFE914SA	2299	492	79	89	81	75	72	80	83	100	90	90	65	90	70				✓	✓	✓	✓
Bosch HSB738356A	3149	709	77	87	84	66	70	75	90	85	100	85	65	90	80	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Omega OF901XZ	2199	570	75	81	83	65	70	70	90	80	80	85	60	100	70					✓	✓	✓
DeLonghi DEF905GW	2299	662	73	77	85	59	70	70	78	60	90	85	65	90	85				✓	✓	✓	✓
60CM DUAL FUEL RANGES																							
• **Bosch** HGV74W355A	2499	366	80	83	85	78	72	75	88	80	85	85	70	90	80	✓	✓ (two sets)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
• **Fisher & Paykel** OR60SDBGFX2	2099	373	78	86	84	71	70	70	88	95	90	85	70	90	75	✓	✓ (two sets)		✓	✓	✓	✓
• **Westinghouse** WFE619SA	1629	351	78	81	93	68	72	70	90	90	90	65	100	90	80		✓ (grill only)				✓ (manual)	
• **DeLonghi** DEF608GW	1959	370	77	86	88	66	67	70	90	85	90	95	80	90	80	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
• **Technika** TEG64U	1749	272	77	85	84	69	70	70	90	90	85	90	70	90	75				✓	✓	✓	✓
• **Smeg** C6GMXA8	2390	323	75	89	85	61	65	90	95	90	90	80	70	90	80		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
• **Beko** CSM 81320 DX	1749	339	72	85	79	63	63	75	85	85	100	80	70	90	55	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
• **Euromaid** GTEOS60	1199	326	72	86	79	59	63	75	85	90	100	80	70	90	55	✓			✓	✓	✓	
• **Ariston** A6TMC2 X AUS	1599	323	70	72	78	63	68	30	75	80	100	75	60	90	60	✓	✓		✓		✓ (manual)	✓

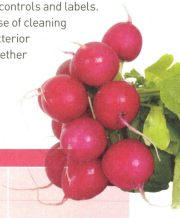
USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of August 2015. **Scores** The overall score is made up of oven performance, cooktop performance, oven ease of use and cooktop ease of use, equally weighted (25% eac
Internal space under What to Look For, p44. **Running costs** Based on using the oven at 170° for one hour, three times per week for 10 years at 28 cents per kWh. Where available, the fan-forced function is used; if not, the

to assess baking a non-uniform food at a moderate-to-high temperature over a long period, while retaining moisture and crisping the skin.

- **Base cooking** Fiona cooks a freshly prepared pizza at a very high temperature for a short time to assess the ability to crisp and brown the base and evenly cook the toppings.
- **Grill** Fiona toasts bread to assess the speed, evenness and heating area of each grill over a short time.

EASE OF USE

Each **oven** is assessed on its controls, their location, clarity of the labels, using and cleaning the grill and the oven. For the **cooktop**, Fiona assesses trivets, burner layout, whether the pots fit comfortably and the stability of pan support, and the controls and labels. She assesses ease of cleaning all interior and exterior surfaces, and whether there are good spill catchment areas on the hob. ▸



SPECIFICATIONS

Fan assist	Top and bottom	Fan forced	Number and type of burners	Claimed burner rating (MJ/h)	Flame failure device – gas cuts out	Claimed external dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Internal useable oven dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Measured internal space (L)	Contact
✓	✓	✓	6: Simmer, large, 2 medium, 2 wok	simmer - 3.6, medium - 6.5, dual - 16.20 / 2.4, triple ring wok - 11.88	✓	(897-910) x 897 x 600	290 x 642 x 405	75	fisherandpaykel.com.au
	✓	✓	5: Simmer, 2 medium, large and wok	simmer - 5.1, medium - 9.0 ,l arge - 12.1, wok burner -14.4	✓	(910-930) x 895 x 600	332 x 787 x 436	114	westinghouse.com.au
✓	✓	✓	6: 2 simmer, 2 medium, large and wok	Simmer - 4 x 2, medium - 7, large - 12, wok burner -14.0	✓	(845-880) x 898 x 600	295 x 775 x 437	100	bosch-home.com.au
✓ (B)	✓	✓	5: Simmer, 2 medium, large and wok	simmer - 3.9, medium - 6.3, large - 10, wok - 15	✓	(870-940) x 898 x 600	302 x 766 x 437	101	omegaappliances.com.au
✓	✓		5: Simmer, 2 medium, large and wok	simmer - 3.6, medium - 6.3, large - 10.3, wok burner - 12.7		(900-925) x 900 x 600	292 x 777 x 428	97	delonghi.com/en-au
	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, wok	simmer - 4, medium - 6.5, wok burner -13.5	✓	900 x 600 x 600	300 x 480 x 422	61	bosch-home.com.au
✓	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, triple ring	simmer - 3.6, medium - 6.3, triple ring -12.7	✓	(900-925) x 600 x 600	285 x 454 x 420	54	fisherandpaykel.com.au
		✓	4: Simmer, medium, large, wok	simmer -5.1, medium - 9, large - 12.7, wok burner -14.4	✓	916 x 596 x 632	294 x 478 x 426	60	westinghouse.com.au
✓	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, triple ring	simmer - 3.6, medium - 6.3, triple ring -12.7	✓	(900 - 925) x 596 x 600	275 x 454 x 419	52	delonghi.com/en-au
	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, wok	simmer - 3.7, medium - 6.8, wok burner -14.5	✓	900 x 600 x 600	272 x 477 x 414	54	technika.com.au
	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, ultra rapid	simmer - 3.9, medium - 7.5, ultra rapid -15.8	✓	915 x 598 x 598	321 x 465 x 415	62	smeg.com.au
✓	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, wok	simmer - 4, medium - 7.5, wok burner -13.0	✓	900 x 600 x 600	325 x 475 x 418	65	beko.com.au
✓	✓	✓	4: Simmer, 2 medium, wok	simmer - 4.0, medium - 7.5, wok burner -13	✓	900 x 600 x 600	310 x 475 x 417	61	euromaid.com.au
✓	✓	✓	4: Simmer, medium, large and wok	simmer - 3.5, medium - 6.0, large - 8.2, wok burner -13.5	✓	930 x 595 x 595	274 x 451 x 420	52	aristonbrand.com

sured internal space Calculated from measurements of the deepest tray or shelf in the lowest position to the grill element, side wall to side wall, and the rear wall to the door. For more details see is used. **TABLE NOTES** • Newly tested. **(A)** Similar model is the Fisher & Paykel OR90SDBGFPX1 with a pyrolytic cleaning feature. **(B)** With bottom element on only – not top.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

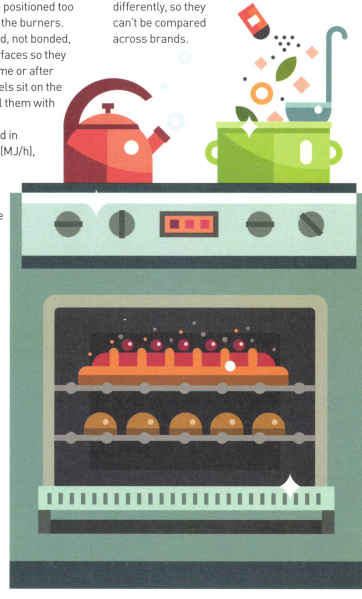
- **Adjustable legs** to match the height of your benchtop and for levelling.

GAS COOKTOP

- Continuous **trivet** design allows pans to be moved around the burners without being lifted.
- A good burner **layout**; simmer and wok burners should be at the front so you don't have to lean over burners to stir a sauce or stir-fry. Medium-sized burners are best at the back.
- **Controls** that are a good size, ideally with a crossbar and a clear pointer. Controls shouldn't be positioned too close to the trivets or the burners.
- **Labels** that are etched, not bonded, on stainless steel surfaces so they don't come off over time or after cleaning. Bonded labels sit on the surface – you can feel them with your fingertips.
- **Gas burners** are rated in megajoules per hour (MJ/h), the amount of energy each uses on its maximum setting. Cooktops should have a good range of heat ratings, from low (about 3.5–5MJ/h) to high (up to 10MJ/h OR 11MJ/h). Wok burners should be about 12–15MJ/h.
- Burners with fewer parts are **easier to clean**. Burner caps that overhang the flame ring are also easier to keep clean as they protect the ring from spills and food being burnt on them.
- Having **flame failure devices** on all burners is an important safety consideration.

OVEN

- A **door** that's easy to open and stays open in any position (without falling all the way open or slamming shut).
- A large enough **window** for a clear view inside – including the top shelf.
- Inner glass panel and/or door that can be **removed for cleaning**.
- **Internal space** Take your largest baking dish with you to the store, rather than going by the stated capacity. Manufacturers measure usable capacity differently, so they can't be compared across brands.



- **Catalytic liners** work by absorbing fat splatters. Look for ones with maximum coverage.
- **Shelves** should have **safety stops** to prevent them from being pulled out accidentally, and shouldn't tilt when pulled out with a load on them.
  - A good range of **shelf positions** and three or more shelves/trays.
  - **Telescopic shelf runners** help to keep the shelf stable, and make it smoother to slide shelves in and out.
  - **Moulded runners** rather than metal pull-out ones are easier to clean.
  - Stainless steel exterior that's **fingerprint resistant.** This will save valuable time when it comes to cleaning.
  - Bright **interior light;** bulb should be easy to replace.
  - **Storage** under the oven for large trays and racks.

GRILL

- The **grill tray** should slide in and out easily and allow you to place food at the back.
- Two smaller grill trays are easier to handle than one larger tray.
- A **smokeless grill tray** traps fat and grease below it, rather than under a wire rack (splattering and smoking fat can be messy).
- The **grill element** should be set high into the ceiling or have a shield so you don't touch it; it should also lower so you can clean the oven ceiling. ■

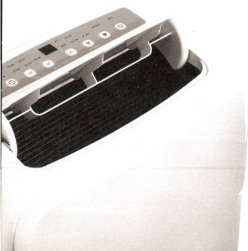
COOL MOVES

Portable air conditioners can give you relief this summer, says **Kim Gilmour**

Portable air conditioners can be a useful way to cool your living space when a permanent split-system set-up isn't ideal – for instance you may be renting, or living in a unit where installing a permanent fixture on common property may go against the bylaws.

We don't find them as efficient as a built-in unit, and they're not covered by the energy label scheme. But our in-depth tests of cooling efficiency, energy consumption and ease of use show that many will go some way to giving you much-needed relief during the unbearable Australian summers.

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



Portable, to a point

Despite their name, portable air conditioners aren't something you can pick up and easily move from one room to another. The lightest in our current batch, the relatively compact **Goldair GCPAC314**, still weighs more than 24 kilograms; the heaviest, the **Convair CP15HW2**, tips the scales at almost 37 kilos. But despite being the heaviest on test, the Convair had handles near the top of each side, so it was easier to pick up than some other units. And the lighter Goldair may not be suitable to roll on deep loop carpet or mats, as the bolt ends at the base of the unit may get hooked. ▸

Nutshell

- Eight new air conditioners tested in a temperature-controlled lab.
- Models that are good at cooling may not be as energy efficient – and vice versa.
- We recommend two new models which are decent all-rounders.

What to look for

Window kits These come with filler panels to close the gap in an open window and direct hot air outside using an exhaust hose.

Exhaust hose If your air conditioner needs to sit far from the window you'll need a longer one.

Drain hose This leads to the outside or into a container to catch extracted water.

Modes Cool, heat, auto, dry (dehumidify) or fan-only are standard. Auto or 'smart' modes adjust the fan speed depending on the temperature set.

Noise These units can be quite loud and distracting to run, especially if they're on full blast.

WHAT TO BUY

71% Dimplex DC15RCBW

Good points

- Good ease of use
- Good cooling performance
- Easy to fit connector to filler panel

Bad points

- Only OK energy efficiency
- Built-in filters are sometimes difficult to remove or refit

70% Teco TP036CFALHBE

Good points

- Good energy efficiency
- Swing function
- Much quieter than other models
- Easy to remove and replace the filter

Bad points

- Only OK cooling performance
- Lack of display on the remote control and no audio feedback
- Short window filler panel

Verdict

In terms of energy efficiency, we found that the Goldair GCPAC314 was very good (we had to rescale our scoring system slightly as a result to take this efficiency into account) but its cooling score and ease of use are only OK.

We can recommend two models: the **Dimplex DC15RCBW**, which has a good cooling score, and the **Teco TP036CFALHBE** with good energy efficiency and less noise. Although the **Honeywell MM14CCS** just missed out because its ease of use and energy efficiency are only OK, it does have a good cooling score, so it may be worth considering if this is your main concern. The **Convair CP15HW2** has a good cooling score, too, but it has borderline energy efficiency and failed the stability test.

ABOUT THE REST

Despite having the best energy efficiency of the new models, the **Goldair GCPAC314** also had the lowest cooling score – it simply isn't as powerful as the others. It's also relatively noisy and doesn't come with a window kit, only an exhaust pipe.

The **Honeywell MM14CCS** has good cooling performance and out of the newly tested batch, had the most even temperature distribution. Illustrations in the instruction booklet are also clear. However, it's heavy and only has one handle, and the window kit is also unimpressive: it has a relatively short exhaust hose, window filler panel and power cord. The **Midea MPPD14CRN1** has a good ease of use score. Its window kit comes with sealing foam, and there's a swing function and auto mode. The **Arlec PA1500**, which uses water to aid cooling, is quiet and easy to use. However, it has a relatively low energy efficiency score and only OK cooling performance.

The **Excelair EPA16** is good for ease of use overall, although you have to bend down to reach the handles, making moving it more awkward. It has a long cord (2160mm) and comes with a drain hose, auto mode and sleep timer settings. Despite a good cooling score, the **Convair CP15HW2** has borderline energy efficiency. It has a handy built-in drain pump and a very wide window kit (1540mm). It fell forwards during our stability test.

	COST		PERFORMANCE			
	Price ($)	Running costs/year ($)	Overall score (%)	Cooling score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Ease of use score (%)
Omega Altise OAPC16	900	166	77	90	63	73
Convair CP12CS1	699	109	71	69	72	71
● **Dimplex** DC15RCBW	1200	147	71	73	64	75
Kogan Kaporaircon	309	102	71	71	81	60
Midea MPPD12HRN1	799	108	71	68	73	74
DeLonghi PACA100ECO	599	77	70	57	89	68
● **Teco** TP036CFALHBE	633	104	70	67	79	65
DeLonghi WE-18INV	1299	153	69	79	59	65
Levante Tango12	699	73	69	58	87	64
● **Midea** MPPD14CRN1	729	166	68	69	60	74
Dimplex DIMC12RC	900	115	67	67	62	71
● **Honeywell** MM14CCS	899	143	67	71	60	68
● **Excelair** EPA16	999	153	66	68	57	74
Omega Altise OAPC1213	699	105	64	62	66	66
● **Arlec** PA1500	499	131	64	61	56	76
Dimplex DC10RC	800	89	63	55	64	71
● **Goldair** GCPAC314	499	85	63	56	81	55
● **Convair** CP15HW2	899	170	63	71	52	64
Argo Dados 40	899	142	62	72	54	56
Polocool PC-44BP/C	995	136	61	62	55	65

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail as of July 2015. **Scores** Overall score made up of co during the cooling tests. **Fan noise on high** Comparative, depends on the environment. At this level, r kWh. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Manually adjustable only. **(B)** Auto. **(C)** Oscillating vertical louvres. **(D)** Not

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

Note that scores have changed slightly from when these models were first tested, as improvements in efficiency mean we need to rescale scores from time to time.

77% Omega Altise 0APC16 (Nov 12) $900
71% Convair CP12CS1 (Nov 13) $699
71% Midea MPPD12HRN1 (Nov 13) $799
71% Kogan Kaporaircon (Nov 14) $309
70% DeLonghi PACA100ECO (Nov 14) $599

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

HOW WE TEST

We test air conditioners in a thermal lab using a test room with sensors, surrounded by a temperature-controlled chamber.

Cooling performance We test each air conditioner with the room at 27°C and 32°C, running maximum cooling settings for an hour each time. To rank performance, the lab looks at the total change in absolute humidity, evenness of room cooling and the average temperature change in both 27°C and 32°C tests.

Ease of use Our experts look at portability (including how easy they are to manoeuvre across carpet and hard floors), installation of the window kit, stability (whether they fall over on a 15 degree slope), water drainage, ease of using controls (including the remote), removing and refitting the air filter, and instructions. ■

81
Number of temperature sensors we use to calculate portable air conditioners' average temperature in our test room

		FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS				
Claimed heating capacity (kW)	Fan noise on high (dBA)	Operating modes	Fan speeds	Oscillating louvres	Sleep timer / with auto temperature adjustment		Weight (kg)	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)	Length of power cord (m)	Length of duct (m)	Maximum length of window kit (cm)	Contact
na	67 - medium	cool / auto / fan	3	(A)	✓/✓		36.1	82 x 42 x 38	2.1	1.5	150	omegaaltise.com.au
na	58 - much quieter	cool / dry / fan	3	(A)	/✓		30.9	75 x 45 x 39	1.6	1.3	116	convair.net.au
4.4	64 - medium	cool / heat / dehumidfy	3	(A)	✓/✓		30.7	76 x 30 x 55	2.0	1.4	139	dimplex.com.au
2.6	62 - quieter	cool / heat / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(C)	✓/✓		29.2	70 x 28 x 47	2.0	1.6	95	kogan.com.au
2.9	58 - much quieter	cool / heat / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(B)	✓/✓		34.5	77 x 46 x 39	1.6	1.5	124	www.mideaair.com.au
na	62 - quieter	cool / heat / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(D)	✓/✓		31.7	77 x 46 x 39	1.9	1.1	95	delonghi.com.au
na	56 - much quieter	cool / dry / fan	3	(C)	✓/✓		29.2	71 x 44 x 35	2.0	1.5	98	teco.com.au
na	65 - medium	cool / auto / dry / fan	3	(D)	✓/✓		39.6	90 x 50 x 40	1.9	1.1	98	delonghi.com.au
na	62 - quieter	cool / auto / dry / fan	3 + auto	(E)	✓/✓		26.5	83 x 45 x 33	1.7	1.5	123	levanteinternational.com.au
na	61 - quieter	cool / dry / fan / auto	3 + auto	(C)	✓/✓		33.0	76 x 43 x 39	1.6	1.3	127	www.mideaair.com.au
3.5	64 - quieter	cool / heat / dry	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓		28.6	76 x 54 x 30	1.9	1.4	134	dimplex.com.au
na	61 - quieter	cool / dehumidify / fan	3	(A)	/		35.9	86 x 47 x 40	1.5	1.2	122	gbi.com.au
na	63 - quieter	auto / cool / fan	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓		32.5	82 x 43 x 38	2.2	1.5	152	gbi.com.au
na	63 - quieter	cool / dry / fan	3 + auto	(A)	/		30.7	78 x 46 x 38	2.0	1.6	95	omegaaltise.com.au
na	57 - quieter	cool / dry / fan / smart / super	3	(A)	✓/✓		32.2	79 x 45 x 38	1.9	1.6	140	bunnings.com.au
3.0	64 - quieter	cool / heat / dry	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓		25.9	62 x 53 x 31	2.4	1.3	119	dimplex.com.au
na	65 - medium	cool / dehumidify	2	(A)	/		24.4	71 x 32 x 35	1.9	1.6	na	goldair.co.nz
3.5	60 - quieter	cool / dehumidify / heat / fan	3	(A)	/		37.0	83 x 50 x 42	1.5	1.5	154	convair.net.au
4.0	66 - medium	cool / heat / dry / fan	3 + auto	(A)	✓/✓(F)		34.1	55 x 50 x 50	1.7	1.6	197	atlantics.com.au
na	64 - medium	cool / dry / fan	3 + auto	(E)	/		39.6	80 x 37 x 57	2.4	1.5	129	polocool.com.au

energy efficiency (30%) and ease of use (30%). Claimed cooling capacity isn't comparable between portable and built-in air conditioners. Measured power consumption is the average power consumed in one hour interfere with normal conversation. **Features** See What to Look For. **Running cost** Approximate cost of operating the unit at maximum capacity for four hours a day for three months in hot weather based on 28c/ able. **(E)** Manual vertical louvres and oscillating horizontal louvres. **(F)** Eco function operates similarly to sleep timer. **na** Not applicable. •Newly tested

Drop the ball

Detergent-free washing is still out of reach, finds **Matthew Steen**

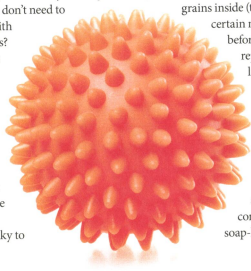
Nutshell

- Six laundry balls tested, as well as soap nuts.
- None work as well as detergent, and most are equal to washing in plain water.

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to throw a device into your washing machine and not have to replace it for years, safe in the knowledge that your laundry is being cleaned and you don't need to fiddle around with messy detergents?

Laundry balls and soap nuts have been on offer for years. We've tested them before, back in the '90s (*CHOICE*, Apr 98), and weren't impressed by the results. We also awarded a Shonky to some laundry balls that claimed to have magnetic properties in 2006. Because laundry balls are still around, we thought we'd see if they'd improved since then.

Laundry balls are basically plastic spheres, some of which have mineral grains inside (these claim a certain number of washes before the grains need replacing). Some laundry balls come with a 'stain stick', which can be used on stains before washing (we didn't test these). We also tested soap nuts, a sort of berry containing a natural soap-like compound.



FRONT LOADER RESULTS	
Omo Powder with built-in pre-treaters, front loader	
Miracle Wash Laundry Ball Kit	
Ecozone Ecoballs 240 washes	
Enviro Washball	
OkoBall Laundry Wash Ball	
Water result in front loader	
Miracle II Laundry Ball	
Nanosmart Laundry Ball	
Soap nuts 100g	
TOP LOADER RESULTS	
Water result in top loader	
Soap nuts 100g	

The wash up

We found all the laundry balls and soap nuts we could on the market. All are to be added to your wash instead of detergent. We tested each of them in a front loader on a cold wash, in line with our laundry detergent method, against 10 stains. We also tested without any product (i.e. water only) and performed another test with Omo With Built-In Pre-Treaters, a leading performing detergent from our previous laundry detergent test (*CHOICE*, May 15). We repeated a test on the soap nuts after the manufacturer claimed they give a better result in a top loader.

Results are unimpressive, yet again. None of the products matched the performance of Omo, and most were equal to a plain water wash with no laundry ball, soap nut or traditional detergent. The only ones that seemed to have any effect on some stains were the Miracle Wash and the Ecozone product, which did marginally better than water on the blood stains, but worse on the baby food and chocolate ice cream stains. Our tester said this was probably due to some alkaline properties of the minerals loosening the blood stain. ■

How we test

Overall score To test detergents, laundry balls and soap nuts, we follow manufacturer directions for the recommended dose for a normally soiled load, and use it to wash specially soiled swatches in cold water (20°C).

Using a spectrophotometer, we measure how much light reflects off the swatches before and after washing, to calculate what percentage of soiling is removed from each swatch. These readings are more accurate than the human eye. (Note that the results cannot be compared with past laundry detergent tests as stain swatches and test conditions have changed since our last test.)

Soils The all-rounder 'general detergency swatch' is stained with nut oil, milk and a colour pigment. We also include swatches with common stains our members told us they need to tackle: perspiration and natural body oil (i.e. stains commonly found on collars and cuffs), grass and mud, olive oil, tomato, make-up, chocolate ice cream, baby food, motor oil, and blood. The swatch selection covers all the main types of stains, and all the detergent functions: to keep soils suspended in the wash liquor and stop them from redepositing on your clothes, enzyme action (such as on protein and oils), bleaching ability, and particle removal (mud).

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK

PERFORMANCE											SPECIFICATIONS					
Dirt removal score (%)	General detergency (%)	Perspiration (%)	Grass/mud (%)	Olive oil (%)	Tomato (%)	Make-up (%)	Chocolate ice-cream (%)	Baby food (%)	Motor oil (5%)	Blood (%)	Type of product	Size of pack costed	Number of washes per pack	Origin	Contact
76	79	67	83	67	80	80	85	94	65	48	Powder	1kg	25	New Zealand	omo.com.au
47	48	47	35	41	66	74	46	48	41	45	Ball	2 units	180	ns	laundryball.com.au
46	47	46	36	39	66	72	45	49	42	46	Ball	2 units	240	China	ecozone.com
43	42	42	34	38	64	68	55	55	43	30	Ball	1 unit	1000	ns	enviroballs.com
43	40	44	34	38	63	67	56	56	41	31	Ball	1 unit	1500	Korea	enviroball.com
43	42	43	34	39	62	66	54	51	44	31	Liquid	na	0	Local	None
42	41	42	34	38	62	64	55	53	42	30	Ball	1 unit	ns	ns	miracle2australia.com.au
42	41	42	33	36	63	62	53	53	42	31	Ball	1 unit	1200	ns	nanosmart.com.au
42	42	41	33	38	64	65	53	55	43	29	Nuts	100g	50	ns	soapnuts.net.au
47	45	45	39	42	67	71	65	64	43	30	Liquid	na	0	Local	None
46	45	43	39	40	65	72	66	63	43	31	Nuts	100g	50	ns	soapnuts.net.au

USING THE TABLE

Price What we paid in June 2015 for the pack size listed. **Dirt removal score** is made up of general detergency (35%), natural body oils (20%), grass/mud (15%), olive oil (6%), and tomato, make-up, chocolate ice cream, baby food, motor oil, and aged blood at 4% each. All tests are done in cold water (20°C). **Visible differences between soil removal scores** A difference of >5% (absolute) between products for any stain could be seen by the human eye. **Size of pack costed / Number of washes per pack** This is the most popular size we found in stores, from which we calculated the number of washes using the recommended dose for a normal wash.

TABLE NOTES ns None stated. **na** Not applicable.

Tablets step up

A tablet can replace a laptop for most users, **Denis Gallagher** finds

Nutshell

- Choosing the right size, capacity and operating system is crucial.
- If you want to use a tablet like a laptop, factor in a keyboard (either included or as an added option).

The latest crop of tablets are super thin and light – and for some people, a tablet is the only laptop they need. So how do you choose the one that's right for you? Our latest tablet round-up covers 14 of the latest models in varying shapes and sizes.

Sticking around

It seems many tablet owners see no reason to ditch their tablet as they're satisfied with

			PERFORMANCE																		
	Price ($)	Overall score	Storage size (GB)	Storage available (GB)	Ease of use score (%)	Screen quality score (%)	Battery score (%)	Performance score (%)	Device overview score (%)	Web surfing score (%)	Watching videos score (%)	Ebook score (%)	Email score (%)	Making videos score (%)	Music score (%)	Photos score (%)	Video calls score (%)	Multimedia versatility score (%)	Backup and security score (%)	Battery life (h:m)
Samsung Galaxy Tab S 10.5	599	80	16	10.08	90	86	69	74	62	87	90	81	93	74	61	79	82	83	80	6:56
Apple iPad Air	499	79	16	12.13	81	80	78	85	60	90	90	84	93	73	52	75	82	67	76	10:58
Samsung Galaxy Tab S 8.4	479	79	16	10.08	83	86	73	74	65	87	90	81	93	74	61	79	82	83	80	7:35
Apple iPad Air 2	619	77	16	10.2	81	86	62	80	61	91	90	84	93	79	56	79	82	67	79	8:11
Apple iPad Mini 3	499	77	16	10.2	81	86	67	75	59	91	90	84	93	79	56	79	82	67	79	8:50
Google Nexus 9	479	75	16	8.98	82	85	54	77	61	87	88	81	92	70	61	60	78	83	66	7:26
Microsoft Surface Pro 3 i7	2199	75	256	208	82	74	47	93	65	89	90	72	93	83	71	81	91	50	64	5:20
Microsoft Surface Pro 3 i5	1399	75	128	93.6	82	74	47	93	65	89	90	72	93	83	71	81	91	50	64	5:24
Microsoft Surface Pro 3 i3	1149	74	64	33.4	82	74	48	90	62	89	90	72	93	83	71	81	91	50	64	5:39
Samsung Galaxy Tab A	399	74	16	9.58	80	69	82	68	59	87	79	57	92	66	56	68	82	67	66	12:29
Sony Xperia Z2	599	74	16	11.2	82	77	50	71	68	87	90	87	93	77	71	70	73	83	69	5:56
Asus Memo Pad 8 ME581C	199	73	16	8.93	78	80	58	74	65	87	90	84	86	70	39	70	60	67	69	7:30
Sony Xperia Z3 Compact	499	73	16	10.28	65	75	76	78	71	87	90	65	86	74	47	63	78	33	56	11:55
Microsoft Surface 3	699	72	64	34	63	79	62	79	64	85	88	64	86	77	66	76	73	67	50	8:44

USING THE TABLE Prices as of July 2015. Tablet prices change frequently, so shop around before buying. **Scores** The overall score is made up of overall function (25%), ease of use (20%), screen quality (20% calls and the balance of 5% for multimedia versatility. Other aspects that are also assessed and scored, but don't contribute to the overall score, are backup and security. The ease of use score takes into account h

their current device. Apple's iPad 2, for example, which first went on sale in 2011, was still being sold three years later and can still run the very latest operating system, iOS 9 (though without some of the latest features such as the split-screen multitasking).

Apple and Samsung are still market leaders, but it's far from a two-horse race. There are plenty of brands besides Samsung that use the Android operating system. What will set them apart are hardware factors such as screen size, resolution, cameras (front and back), wireless networking standard (choose 802.11ac for the best speed), the number and type of ports (USB or HDMI?) and more, with one of the main considerations for many people being battery life.

Ecosystems

For some people, their choice of tablet will be largely determined by its operating system (OS), the main options being Apple's iOS, Google's Android and Microsoft's Windows.

Each of these systems has its own software ecosystem of online stores with apps, music, movies, books and more. If you also have a smartphone and computer (and these days, who doesn't?) you'll find economies of scale, a lower learning curve and easier transition between devices if you stick with one OS across all.

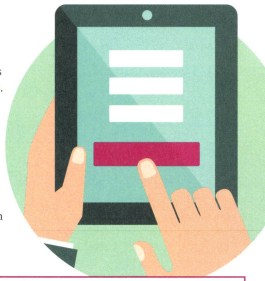


IMAGE: RAWTERSTOCK

Sizing up tablets

In our table, we've listed the tablets in order of overall score, but there's a variety of sizes. You may have a preference for a particular size, which will help you narrow your choice.

Generally tablets come in three display sizes:

- compact tablets (5-8 inches),
- medium tablets (over 8-11 inches)
- large tablets (11 inches and over).

RES | SPECIFICATIONS

Can use USB key	Near field communication (NFC)	Stylus supplied	GPS	Voice control	HDMI	Wi-Fi (802.11ac)	Screen, diagonal (inches)	Native resolution – width (pixels)	Native resolution – height (pixels)	Video resolution (pixels,front/rear)	Front camera resolution (Mp)	Rear camera resolution (Mp)	Operating system version	Weight (kg, without keyboard)	Size (mm, W x H x D)	Website
			✓	✓		✓	10.5	2560	1600	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	0.5	242 x 177 x 7	samsung.com/au
				✓			9.7	2048	1536	720 / 1080	1.2	5	iOS 7.0.3	0.5	240 x 169 x 7.7	apple.com.au
✓			✓	✓		✓	8.4	2560	1600	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	0.3	213 x 125 x 7	samsung.com/au
				✓		✓	9.7	2048	1536	720 / 1080	1.2	8	iOS 8.1	0.4	240 x 169 x 6.3	apple.com.au
				✓		✓	7.9	2048	1536	720 / 1080	1.2	5	iOS 8.1	0.3	200 x 134 x 7.6	apple.com.au
	✓		✓	✓		✓	8.9	2048	1536	720 / 1080	1.6	8.1	Android 5.0	0.4	228 x 153.5 x 8.22	store.google.com
✓		✓		✓		✓	12.2	2160	1440	1080 / 1080	4.5	4.5	Windows 8.1 Pro	0.8	292 x 201 x 9	microsoft.com.au
✓		✓		✓		✓	12.2	2160	1440	1080 / 1080	4.5	4.5	Windows 8.1 Pro	0.8	292 x 201 x 9	microsoft.com.au
✓		✓		✓		✓	12.2	2160	1440	1080 / 1080	4.5	4.5	Windows 8.1 Pro	0.8	292 x 201 x 9	microsoft.com.au
			✓				9.7	1024	768	480 / 720	1.9	5	Android 5.0.2	0.4	242 x 167 x 7.61	samsung.com/au
✓	✓		✓			✓	10.1	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	8	Android 4.4.2	0.4	266 x 172 x 6	sony.com.au
✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	8.0	1920	1080	720 / 1080	1.2	3.7	Android 4.4.2	0.3	211 x 122 x 8.16	asus.com.au
✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	8.1	1920	1200	1080 / 1080	2.1	6	Android 4.4.4	0.3	212 x 122 x 6.37	sony.com.au
✓						✓	10.8	1920	1280	1080 / 1080	3.5	7.1	Windows 8.1	0.6	265 x 187 x 8.74	microsoft.com.au

(15%), performance (10%) and device overview (10%). The overall function consists of web surfing (20%), watching videos (15%), 10% each for ebook reading, email, making videos, music, photos and video it to handle and use the device and makes up 20% of the overall score. Device overview includes construction quality, connections available, storage available and portability.

Tip

You can now get Bluetooth wireless keyboards that work across multiple platforms so you can take your keyboard from your Windows desktop PC or Mac, and use it with your tablet running Windows, iOS or Android. Check first on the keyboard box for compatibility.

New tablet options for Windows, Android and iOS

Six months is usually a long time in technology. In this period you might expect to see updated models with extra features, speed, storage capacity and so on, and you'll need to decide if it will be worth the cost of upgrading.

However, since our last update in March, not much has happened in Apple land and even Android powerhouse companies such as Samsung and Sony are light on the ground with new releases.

Google has released the **Google Nexus 9** to showcase their latest OS, with the tablet sporting the latest Android 5.0 (Lollipop) operating system to excite early adopters. The latest features on offer include improved Wi-Fi and notification control, and better password-protected theft deterrents; however, if you wait long enough, these features will be available on newer Android devices over coming months. The **Samsung Galaxy Tab A** is one of the first non-Google devices to sport the new Android OS and would be a good value option for the family.

Microsoft has gone into intense Windows 10 mode with the new OS predicted to offer a much improved user experience over the sometimes maligned Windows 8.1 OS. Unfortunately, we didn't get to test the **Microsoft Surface Pro 3 i5** and **Microsoft Surface Pro 3 i7** with the latest OS and would suggest that the overall user experience in a Windows 10 environment would be a significant improvement. The major differences between the latest Microsoft Surface Pro 3 models and the model tested previously are computer processor, hard drive capacity and price. You pay a lot more for the extra speed and capacity but when you notice the available storage on the cheapest model, you quickly realise what you get for the extra dollars.

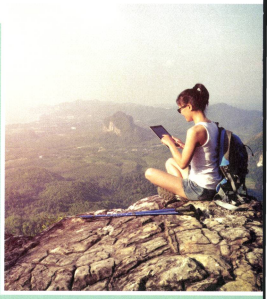
The **Microsoft Surface 3** is the company's latest mid-priced tablet device and a competitor to the Apple iPad and Android tablets based on a similar price point. However, its ease of use is not as good as the top performing iOS and Android tablets.

The **Sony Xperia Z3 Compact** and **Asus Memo Pad 8 ME581C** provide a small form factor option with both units comfortably fitting in a coat. ■

TABLET RELIABILITY

Our reliability surveys ask members about the devices they own, what they think of them and how they've held up over time. We surveyed 3098 CHOICE members in August 2014:

- **Most tablet owners have only had them a few years, so long-term reliability isn't yet known. Tablets have lower levels of major problems than computers; only 4% of Apple, 11% of Samsung and 12% of Asus tablets had major problems in the first four years.**
- **Apple was the most reliable tablet brand and had significantly fewer reported problems than other brands.**
- **An owner rating was calculated based on how satisfied customers are with the product; Apple received the highest owner rating ahead of Samsung and Asus. Service and support is also rated highly by Apple tablet owners.**



Dual personality mobiles

Get a more versatile mobile, says **Denis Gallagher**

There are more mobile phone numbers in Australia than people. So unless your pets are leading secret lives (unlikely) an increasing number of us are juggling two handsets at the same time.

A dual SIM mobile phone with two separate SIM card slots can solve the problem, letting you make and receive phone calls and text messages for two different numbers using two different mobile carriers, all on the one handset.

Dual SIM phones are ideal for people who commonly juggle more than one number, such as emergency service workers where constant contact is part of the job description, and corporate employees with the work mobile as part of a salary package.

Dual SIM phones get better

Dual SIM mobiles have, until recently, been fairly bland, with many only working on the GSM (2G) band with just basic talk and text functionality. Thankfully there is now a range of affordable smartphones that deliver good performance at a reasonable price. All the models tested offer smartphone functionality such as email, web browsing and 3G network support on at least one of the SIMs, and are available for under $400.

They also all support the Australian GSM (2G) bands (900/1800) for SIM 1 and SIM 2 and 2100MHz on the 3G band (used by Telstra, Vodafone and Optus) for the main SIM. Check out the table for the right combination for your desired phone network, such as support for 850MHz (Telstra/Vodafone) or 900MHz (Optus).

Does my favourite phone have a dual SIM version?

Although not available in time for this test, dual SIM versions of premium smartphones such as the Samsung Galaxy S6, LG G4 and Sony Xperia Z3+ have started to appear in online stores; but you'll pay much more for them and don't expect to find them in Telstra, Optus or Vodafone stores anytime soon. It's not in the retailers' interest to promote a product that encourages you to so easily compare mobile plans between providers! The dual SIM models for this test are available online (using the wonders of Google) or from major retailers unlocked and ready to use. Sites such as uniquemobiles.com.au or yatango.com.au have a selection of dual SIM mobiles, as well as local retailers such as Dick Smith, JB Hi-Fi and Officeworks.

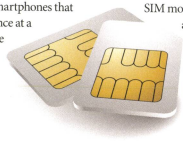


IMAGE SHUTTERSTOCK

Nutshell

- Dual SIM mobiles allow you to shop around for the best phone plan.
- Find a dual SIM mobile to suit your lifestyle.

Active or standby?

Most dual SIM mobiles operate in a standby mode with the primary SIM being active and the second SIM in standby mode; forcing incoming calls for the inactive SIM number to message bank. Enabling call forwarding on the first SIM may be one solution if you want to be in constant contact on both numbers, although additional phone network charges may apply.

Dual SIM mobiles that support the active SIM feature keep both numbers active. This means the mobile automatically switches between SIM cards for an incoming call and also lets you move from one number to another by simply selecting the SIM in your settings. You can even put a call on hold from one number and answer an incoming call on the other mobile number.

Only the **LG Optimus L7 II Dual** and **Sony Xperia M2 Dual** of the models we tested are 'Dual SIM Active'.

Why you might find a dual SIM phone useful

Smart kids mobile

One SIM could be used for parents to keep in contact with their kids, while the second SIM (paid for by the child out of their own money) could be for social networking, watching videos and talking with friends they've left at the school gates minutes earlier. The parent could keep the account for both SIMs if they wish to track calls.

Smart travelling

Depending on your home mobile plan, overseas travellers may be able to receive calls on their Australian number while using the travel SIM for local calls and data, avoiding expensive global roaming charges.

If travelling within Australia and your main SIM isn't getting reception, buy a prepaid SIM using the competitor's network and switch between the two. You'll need a model that support both the 850MHz and 900MHz 3G networks.

Optus and many overseas countries are using GSM networks for the foreseeable future so you can continue to use a GSM travel SIM for the second slot overseas or a cheap prepaid SIM in Australia.

Smart business

A dual SIM phone can create a virtual group of companies. You could be 'Vandelay Industries' on one number and 'ACME Corp' on another; creating a big business identity on a small business budget.

WHAT TO BUY

75%
LG Optimus L7 II Dual (P716)

Good points

- Active SIM lets you receive calls from two numbers at the same time
- Very good email, browsing and touchscreen scores
- Excellent for handling and SMS performance
- Cheapest model among the top performers

Bad points

- No HD video capture
- Lowest effective screen resolution in our test
- 3G support on SIM 1 only

75%
Samsung Galaxy Grand 2 SM-G7102

Good points

- Support for both 850MHz and 900MHz 3G networks
- Large 5.3-inch display
- Very good for SMS, browsing, email, music, touchscreen and general handling

Bad points

- 3G support on SIM 1 only

			PERFORMANCE																FEATURES						
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Durability score (%)	Reception score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Handling score (%)	SMS score (%)	Internet score (%)	Email score (%)	Camera score (%)	Music score (%)	Video score (%)	Touchscreen score (%)	GPS score (%)	Synchronisation score (%)	Display score (%)	Both SIMs active	One SIM on Standby	Optus (900MHz)	Telstra/Vodafone (850MHz)	3G on both SIMs	Front facing camera	Autofocus	HD
LG Optimus L7 II Dual (P716)	199	75	78	65	67	90	93	82	80	52	77	54	82	55	80	75	✓			✓(A)		✓	✓	
Samsung Galaxy Grand 2 SM-G7102	269	75	82	63	71	89	86	89	80	49	80	65	82	45	80	71		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Sony Xperia M2 Dual	349	73	74	70	68	79	93	81	80	35	79	50	82	55	80	77	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Motorola Moto G XT1068 2nd generation	299	71	83	50	72	79	86	82	70	40	58	47	91	63	70	74		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Huawei Ascend G750-U10	299	69	69	50	66	80	79	82	70	55	75	64	82	46	80	76		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Samsung Galaxy S Duos S7562	149	66	72	68	67	71	79	69	70	23	59	61	73	46	70	62		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Samsung Galaxy Trend Duos GT-S7392	159	63	80	58	68	75	79	55	50	31	59	30	64	40	70	53		✓	✓					
HTC Desire 516 Dual SIM	189	62	73	62	62	57	79	69	60	30	78	37	55	40	70	68		✓	✓			✓	✓	
Microsoft Lumia 532 Dual SIM	169	62	70	65	73	56	79	66	60	25	53	30	82	53	70	53		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Samsung Galaxy Young 2	129	60	69	63	69	66	72	54	50	21	73	30	73	38	70	39		✓	✓	✓				
Nokia X Dual SIM (RM-980)	129	56	71	57	70	56	72	36	40	17	66	30	36	57	40	65		✓	✓					

USING THE TABLE **Price** Recommended retail, as of July 2015. Prices sourced from various online retailers with delivery included to Australian address. **Scores** The overall score is made up of dura
TABLE NOTES **(A)** Next G version supporting 850MHz has a LP 716 product code while a version with support for the 900MHz network will show a P715 in the product code and operates in Dual SIM

73%
Sony Xperia M2 Dual

Good points
- Support for both 850MHz and 900MHz 3G networks
- Active SIM lets you receive calls from two numbers at the same time
- Very good for browsing and excellent for SMS performance
- Can change removable memory without having to remove the back of the case

Bad points
- 3G support on SIM 1 only

71%
Motorola Moto G XT1068 2nd Generation

Good points
- Support for both 850MHz and 900MHz 3G networks
- Very good browsing and SMS
- Excellent touchscreen

Bad points
- 3G support on SIM 1 only

For what to look for and how we test, go to **choice.com.au/smartphoneguide**

ABOUT THE REST

The **Huawei Ascend G750-U10** and **Samsung Galaxy S Duos S7562** are the only models we tested that support 3G network on both SIMs, so if you want to use both numbers for downloads or other data use, these models should be on your list. Telstra network users wanting an affordable dual SIM mobile could look at the **Microsoft Lumia 532 Dual SIM** or **Samsung Galaxy Young 2** as a good holiday mobile or first phone for the kids, while Optus users who are fans of **HTC** handsets will find the **Desire 516 Dual SIM** reasonable value. If looking for some weird bragging rights you can get the **Nokia X Dual SIM (RM-980)** as it's one of the very few Nokia phones using Google's Android OS. Performance is nothing special but it's cheap. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

Removable battery	Time in use 3G (h:min)	Standby time 3G (days)	Internal memory (GB)	Maximum memory (GB)	Camera resolution (megapixels)	Specific absorption rate (SAR) W/kg	Battery capacity (mAh)	Operating system	App store	Screen resolution (pixels)	Display size (in)	Weight (g)	Dimensions (H x W x D, mm)	SIM type	Contact
✓	6:42	17	4	34	8	0.66	2460	Android 4.1.2	Google Play	480 x 800	4.3	118	122 x 67 x 10	Mini	lg.com.au
✓	17:00	15	8	69	8	0.44	2600	Android 4.3	Google Play	720 x 1280	5.3	164	147 x 76 x 10	Micro	samsung.com.au
	12:12	26	8	37	8	0.78	2330	Android 4.3	Google Play	540 x 960	4.8	148	140 x 72 x 9	Micro	sony.com.au
	ns	ns	8	38	8	0.69	2070	Android 5.0.2	Google Play	720 x 1280	5	152	142 x 71 x 11.5	Micro	motorola.com.au
✓	ns	ns	8	37	13	0.42	3000	Android 4.2.2	Google Play	720 x 1280	5.5	162	150 x 78 x 10	Mini/Micro	huawei.com.au
✓	8:00	12	4	66	5	0.59	1500	Android 4.2.2	Google Play	480 x 800	4	120	122 x 63 x 11	Mini	samsung.com.au
✓	8:00	14	4	66	3.2	0.49	1500	Android 4.1.2	Google Play	480 x 800	4	126	122 x 64 x 11	Micro	samsung.com.au
✓	9:00	9	4	34	5	0.45	1950	Android 4.3	Google Play	540 x 960	5	171	140 x 73 x 10	Mini	htc.com/au
✓	12:00	22	8	135	5	0.58	1560	Windows 8	Store	480 x 800	4	135	119 x 66 x 14	Micro	microsoft.com.au
✓	6:00	ns	4	34	3.2	0.92	1300	Android 4.4.2	Google Play	320 x 480	3.5	108	110 x 60 x 12	Micro	samsung.com.au
✓	10:30	17	4	33	3.2	1.14	1500	Nokia X software (B)	Store	480 x 800	4	131	116 x 64 x 11	Micro	microsoft.com.au

reception (10%), sound quality (10%), handling (10%), SMS (10%), internet (5%), email (5%), camera (5%), music (5%), video (5%), touchscreen (5%), GPS (5%), synchronisation (5%) and display (5%).
by mode not Active mode. **(B)** Android used as the base operating system with a Nokia overlay or skin applied. **ns** Not stated.

VINYL REVIVAL

A rediscovered appreciation for vinyl has us testing turntables for the first time in 40 years. **Denis Gallagher** spins some discs

Nutshell

- Eleven turntables tested, including models that can make digital copies of your records.
- You'll need to spend a bit of cash to get good sound, but we found you don't have to break the bank.

Young retro enthusiasts and nostalgic fans are obviously finding something in the vinyl grooves of records that CDs and music downloads just can't deliver, with record sales experiencing steady growth over the last decade.

Some have credited the international Record Store Day – held annually since 2007 on the third Saturday in April – as a significant contributor to vinyl's revival, claiming the day is a celebration of the vinyl record as well as the sense of community in 'hanging out' at the local record store. At the most recent event, exclusive vinyl pressings released on the day included current artists (Gang of Youths, Courtney Barnett), established rock stars (Foo Fighters, U2) and reissues from legends (Johnny Cash, Sex Pistols).

In response to a steady stream of requests for a test of good-quality turntables, CHOICE turned back the clock and placed some vinyl on the platter. The models chosen are readily available and priced at a level that shouldn't break the bank for most music lovers. However, if you're so inclined, at the luxury (or obsessive) end of the scale you can easily drop $20,000 or more on a turntable with an air suspension system. We also recently tested a range

of cheap USB record players (look for them soon on choice.com.au).
The difference between the two could be likened to flying to Japan to enjoy a private tea ceremony with the rarest of loose-leaf blends, as opposed to sucking on a used home-brand teabag. The models tested are somewhere in the middle.

SIGNAL TO NOISE RATIO (SNR) How much the musical signal stands out from any noise

Reality check

Despite the significant increases in sales year-on-year since 2006, vinyl will continue to be a niche product for the foreseeable future. From 1.1 billion records sold worldwide in 1981, LP sales hit rock bottom at under 1 million in 2006. Even with the 54% increase over the past year, vinyl currently accounts for only 2% of total music sales.

Interestingly, fans of CDs have little to feel smug about, as their time at the top seems to have lasted little more than a couple of decades, compared to the 50-year dominance of vinyl. CDs account for less than half of total music industry revenues, due to the explosion of both downloaded music and streaming services, and the CD market share is on a downward trend.

REMOVABLE LID Some enthusiasts believe that a turntable sounds better without a lid

45rpm Standard playback speed for 7" singles. All the models tested support this speed

78rpm Standard playback speed for 10" and 12" shellac records. Do some research before using your old 78rpm records, as you may find your stylus can't play it properly

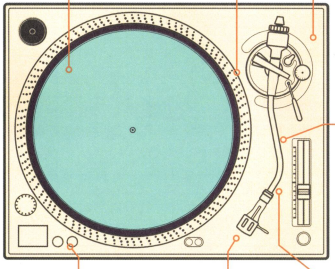
REVERSE PLAY Causes the record to spin anti-clockwise – handy to reveal any hidden satanic messages, or for mixing

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

PRE-AMP MODEL
Some models have an inbuilt pre-amp, making it easier to hook the turntable up to many of the current range of amplifiers. If you use a pre-amp, then you connect to a line input instead.

DRIVE TYPE Direct drive turntables deliver rotational speed accuracy, but some argue that belt drive isolates motor noise from the platter.

MOTOR TYPE An AC motor uses the accuracy of the 50Hz mains power (or an ELV power converter) to control the speed accuracy of the turntable, but a DC motor may be quieter.



PLATTER MAT (ALSO CALLED A SLIPMAT)
You don't want it to create static, or scratch the other side of your records.

PLATTER CONSTRUCTION
Broadly speaking, the bigger the platter, the more likely it is to maintain a constant speed.

DAMPED CUEING
This mechanically slows the lowering of the tonearm. There's no good reason not to have this feature, even if you do have a steady hand.

TONEARM SHAPE
Some say straight arms travel less distance, so the audio is more pure; others say a curve increases stability. CHOICE's take? Whatever floats your boat.

33 1/3RPM Standard playback speed for 12" LPs. All models tested support this speed.

CARTRIDGE Those designed for microgroove records are often not suitable for playing 78rpm shellac records.

TONEARM MATERIAL
Most are a light metal alloy; some use carbon fibre.

WHAT TO BUY

80% Audio-Technica LP120-USB

This is the only model tested that uses a direct drive to rotate the platter, but its accuracy is as good as any of the other models using a belt drive, and the controls are easy to find and use.

A switchable built-in pre-amp and USB out (to digitise your records) makes this a versatile turntable that can be used in a variety of home entertainment systems. DJ features such as pitch stabilisation, pitch adjustment and a stroboscope light give users a lot of control over how the record will sound, and let you move seamlessly from one track to another.

80% Thorens TD 158

Equal favourite for sound quality, the TD 158 also delivered excellent performance for our technical tests for tracking force and rotational speed accuracy – which is fortunate, as you can't adjust the tracking force. Fully automatic operation means you don't have to hover around the turntable when a side is finished, and the settings for speed, tonearm pickup and starting the turntable are clearly marked and easy to use.

If you want to add one of these to your existing music system, make sure it has a phono input, as the TD 158 does not have an inbuilt phono pre-amp.

76% Pro-Ject Audio Debut Carbon DC

Coming in a range of colours and with no visible controls, the **Pro-Ject Audio Debut Carbon DC** is arguably the most attractive turntable we tested. The turntable is turned on from the main switch and the rotational speed is adjusted by lifting the platter and changing the belt from one pulley to another. The anti-skate setting is controlled via a small weight system on a thin wire – stylish, but fiddly.

Fortunately, good audio quality lends substance to the design.

If you want to add this model to your existing music system, make sure it has a phono input as there's no inbuilt phono pre-amp.

	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES												SPECIFICATIONS		
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Listening score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Technical score (%)	Pre-amp built-in	Tone arm clamp	Damped cueing	78rpm support	Pitch stabilisation	Removeable hinged lid	45rpm spindle adapter	On/off switch	Stop/start	Tracking force adjustment	Anti-skate / bias adjustment	Drive type	Tonearm material	Cartridge model
Audio-Technica LP120-USB	499	80	78	77	89	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	direct	metal	AT95E
Thorens TD 158	690	80	78	74	91		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓			belt	metal	TAS 257
Pro-Ject Audio Debut Carbon DC	599	76	76	60	90		✓	✓	(C)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	belt	carbon	OM 10
Pro-Ject Audio Elemental Phono USB	399	73	75	56	86	✓(A)	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓				belt	metal	OM 5E
Denon DP-300F	649	72	66	81	83	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	belt	metal	DSN-85
NAD C556	599	72	75	51	83		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	belt	metal	Rega Carbon
Rega RP1	599	70	66	60	93		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	belt	metal	Rega Carbon
Rega RP3 + Elys 2	1349	70	71	51	84		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	belt	metal	Elys 2
Marantz TT5005	499	69	75	50	70	✓					✓	✓		✓			belt	metal	DSN-82
Marantz TT-42	599	68	66	66	78	(B)	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓			belt	ns	DMS 251 S
Thorens TD 170-1	890	61	54	72	73	(B)		✓	(D)		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	belt	ns	OM 10

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended price, as of August 2015. **Scores** The overall score is made up of listening (60%), ease of use (20%), and technical score (20%). **(A)** The inbuilt pre-amp can't be switched off. **(B**

73% Pro-Ject Audio Elemental Phono USB

Winning the prize for most unusual design and least expensive of the models we tested, the **Pro-Ject Audio Elemental USB** can output record tracks to digital files. The platter hangs over a slim base, with the tonearm hanging out in space like a tiny crane. The pulley belt system to change the rotational speed for singles is finicky.

There was no cover available for this model although the company claims one will be available towards the end of the year. The built-in pre-amp can't be switched off, which means it would not be suitable for a system with its own pre-amp (commonly found in high-end component music systems).

72% Denon DP-300F

The **Denon DP-300F** is a very easy to use, fully automatic turntable, with controls for rotational speed and record size.

Technical performance for tracking force and rotational accuracy is also very good, and although our listening panel didn't rate it among the top models for audio quality, it's still within the range you'd expect to find in a turntable at this price point.

A switchable built-in pre-amp makes the Denon a good option for any home entertainment system whether it has a phono input. However the Denon but might not be the ideal family-friendly option, as there's no clamp to keep the tonearm in place.

72% NAD C556

The **NAD C556** has a start and stop switch on the base as the only visible control, with the rotational speed adjusted by lifting the platter and changing the belt from one pulley to another. The listening panel found the audio quality to be good. Technical performance results were also very good.

Our tester found the initial set-up to be finicky, requiring an alignment of the cartridge using a cardboard gauge as well as fitting the tonearm weight and adjusting the tracking force bias.

The extra set-up may have been worth the effort, as our listening panel preferred the NAD over the virtually identical Rega RP1. ▸

	Recommended tracking force (gram force)	Stylus type	Stylus shape	Platter construction	Platter mat	Motor type	Operation	Speed change mechanism	Number of feet	H x W x D (mm)	Weight (kg)	Country of origin	Warranty (yr)	Website
5E	1.5–2.5	diamond	elliptical	aluminium	felt	DC	manual	pushbuttons	4	157 x 450 x 352	10.7	China	1	audio-technica.com.au
S	2	diamond	conical	aluminium	felt	DC	full auto	lever	4	130 x 420 x 360	4.5	Germany	3	thorens.com
n 10	1.5	diamond	elliptical	metal	felt	AC	manual	belt shift	4	118 x 415 x 320	5.6	EU	2	project-audio.com
n 5E	1.75	diamond	elliptical	MDF	felt	AC	manual	belt shift	4	90 x 430 x 300	2.8	EU	2	project-audio.com
5	2	diamond	conical	aluminium	rubber	DC	full auto	pushbutton	4	122 x 434 x 381	5.5	China	3	au.denon.com
Carbon	1.4–2.5	diamond	conical	phenolic resin	felt	AC	manual	belt shift	3	115 x 447 x 360	4	England	3	nadelectronics.com
Carbon	1.5–2	diamond	conical	phenolic resin	felt	AC	manual	belt shift	3	112 x 442 x 362	4.2	England	ns	rega.co.uk
	1.75	diamond	elliptical	float glass	felt	AC	manual	belt shift	3	114 x 443 x 364	5.9	England	ns	rega.co.uk
2	3.5	diamond	conical	aluminium	rubber	DC	full auto	pushbutton	4	97 x 360 x 357	2.8	China	3	marantz.com
1 S	2	diamond	conical	metal	felt	DC	full auto	dial	4	119 x 420 x 360	5.5	Germany	3	marantz.com
n 10	1.5	diamond	elliptical	aluminium	felt	DC	full auto	lever	4	125 x 420 x 360	4.6	Germany	3	thorens.com

with inbuilt pre-amp is also available. **(C)** A pulley kit is available to play 78s. **(D)** Cartridge must be changed to play 78s. **ns** Not stated.

WHAT TO BUY cont'd

70% Rega RP1

The **Rega RP1** has a start and stop switch on the base as the only visible control, with the rotational speed adjusted by lifting the platter and changing the belt from one pulley to another. Although the NAD and Rega RP1 seem virtually identical, the listening panel found the audio quality to be OK for the Rega but not as good as the NAD. This may have been due to the Rega RP1 being delivered as a ready-to-play unit, while the NAD required additional user preparation. Neither the NAD nor Rega RP1 allow for tracking force adjustment, with the Rega delivering the lightest tracking force measured while the NAD was within the parameters set.

70% Rega RP3 + Elys 2

The **Rega RP3** is the most expensive turntable we tested and included an upgraded stylus and a platter made of solid glass instead of the more common MDF or metal. Our listening panel found the overall audio quality to be good, though not as good as the top-performing models. The initial setup is finicky, requiring a similar cartridge alignment process to the NAD. The Rega RP3 also suffered from the same issue as the Rega RP1 and NAD: the lid comes off the hinge when lifting with one hand, as the hinge isn't fastened down on either side.

About the rest

Our listening panel found the fully automatic **Marantz TT5005's** audio quality to be good and it includes a built-in switchable pre-amp. But its technical performance, while good, wasn't as accurate as the other models here, and it was the only model without an option to manually cue the record with a lever, which may be an issue if you're selecting individual tracks.

The **Marantz TT42** delivers OK audio, according to our listening panel, and is also fully automatic, but some of the other models tested deliver better overall performance at a lower price.

Beautiful music may be in the ear of the beholder, but the **Thorens TD 170-1** performed surprisingly poorly compared to the cheaper 'mid-level' Thorens.

How we test

Our tester, Scott, measures the rotational accuracy of the turntable, tracking force of the cartridge and ease of use. What he can't score is the nostalgic satisfaction achieved when a record, fished from a milk crate at the back of the attic or garage after half a lifetime, is pulled out to reveal the liner notes and lyrics that are still remembered word for word.

Listening performance Speakers are positioned about two metres away from our expert listening panel, who assesses the overall quality of the sound using classical and rock/pop music passages.

Ease of use Initial set-up including attaching the platter and belt and any adjustments needed before operation; thoroughness of the instruction manual; and operational aspects such as speed selection and cueing a track.

Technical score Difference between the claimed and measured figures for wow and flutter; tracking force; and frequency response using calibrated reference LPs. We also measure the rotational speed for accuracy.

To clean or not to clean?

Dust will make its way onto the record surface at some point no matter how clean your home is. Many audiophiles would suggest that visible dust on the record surface is brushed aside by the stylus and any that collects on the stylus can be easily blown away.

This may be good advice for enthusiasts who are longtime vinyl fans, but what about the significant number of people considering their first turntable after a 20-year hiatus, whose record collection has been stored in less than ideal conditions (for example, under the house or in the garage)?

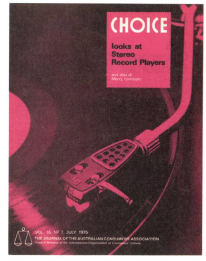
Our advice would be to make sure your records are in good condition before laying them on the platter. If they're in bad condition with finger marks and mould, then give them a good (careful) clean and you should be able to use them without too much further upkeep. Cleaning solutions and tools (not to mention professional advice) are available from many hi-fi stores and online.

Lid position during play also seems to generate debate, but keeping the lid closed while playing records will prevent dust falling onto the record surface. Depending on the room environment and ambient temperature, playing with the lid open may offer sonic improvements.

TURNTABLE OR RECORD PLAYER?

▼ A **record player** has the pre-amp and amp, and sometimes even the speakers, all built into the one unit. While this may sound like the ideal solution, you'll generally find that the quality of sound is not what you'd be happy listening to.

▲ A **turntable** has a flat *platter* to hold the record and a drive (*direct motor* or *belt* drive) to turn the record at a certain speed. A *stylus* (often a diamond) housed in a *cartridge* at the end of a *tonearm* is placed in the groove of the record, generating a low level electrical signal that goes through the stereo cables to the pre-amp. The signal travels to the power amp for amplification and sound is produced via headphones or speakers.



We last tested turntables in 1975, for the "young CHOICE" demographic. The Technic s 1200LS we used then is still going strong – it was our reference machine in this test.

Digitising your records

Some of the turntables we tested not only have a built-in pre-amp, but also a USB output – so you can hook it up to your PC with a USB cable and transfer the tracks to a digital music file, ready to download to your music player.

If you're looking to digitise your record collection and already have your favourite turntable (or want to choose one of the models we tested without a USB output) you could look at a solution like the the NAD PP4 Digital Phono/USB Preamplifier, as it can replace the phono support not available on some amplifiers.

There are models designed specifically to digitise your records rather than as a permanent addition to your home hi-fi system, but as our upcoming review will show, these are usually a cheap and very nasty option. Keep an eye out for the results on **choice.com.au/homeaudio.** ■

Plug your turntable into a USB preamp to digitise your favourite tracks.

★★★½☆

HONDA HR-V VTi-L

PRICE $36,800 as tested

CONTACT honda.com.au

'Magic' car ride

An economical and reasonable performer is let down by cabin noise and lack of boot space, says **Rebecca Ciaramidaro**

We tested the front-wheel drive Honda HR-V VTi-L, with a 1.8-litre four-cylinder petrol engine with CVT (constantly variable transmission) gearbox and paddle shifters for manual control.

After our tester was finished with the car, my family used it for all the usual weekend activities to see what the HR-V is like as a family car.

6.9L vs 7.4L
Fuel usage claim vs measured per 100km

14.6m
Braking distance from 60km/h

The family says

My husband Marco and I thought there was plenty of shoulder room in the rear seat to comfortably get our 11-month-old son Biagio in and out of the car, and plenty of leg room for adult passengers when the front seat was pushed all the way back. The rear seat would fit two child seats comfortably, but not a third passenger.

Our biggest issue was with the boot space. It fit our pram and baby bag, but there wasn't much room for anything else.

We found the rear reversing camera with self-adjusting guidelines very useful. We were even more impressed with the 'LaneWatch' blind spot display camera that's built into the left side mirror. It really helped to eliminate blind spots, allowing for safe and confident merging and turning.

Everything is operated by touch which makes for a sleek dash design, but it could have done with some dials for the sound system volume and especially for the A/C. We had to momentarily take our eyes off the road to find where we had to touch.

CHOICE says

The steering wheel is comfortable to hold and steering is quite responsive. At low speeds, steering is very light but becomes heavier as the speed increases.

The CVT gearbox works reasonably well, but when you put your foot down it emits the high-pitched drone usually associated with CVT gearboxes. This sound comes through to the cabin along with the noise from the road, which is especially noticeable on coarse roads.

If you're travelling on a well-sealed road, it's a pleasant and enjoyable ride. On anything else you'll get bounce. Visibility around the car is fairly good with no real obstructions in any direction.

9.7s
Acceleration to 100km/h

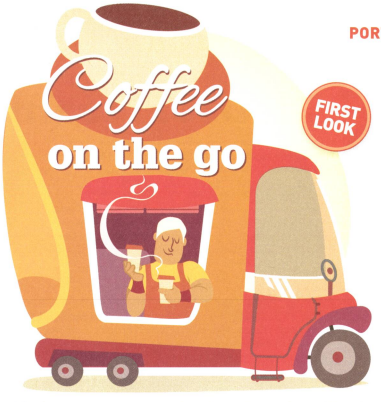
Honda is marketing the HR-V seats as 'Magic Seats', and they're like no others we've seen. At a basic level, they're comfortable leather seats with adequate side support. The 'magic' is in the ability to change the cabin layout to one of four modes – normal, utility, tall and long – with 18 different seating options. The 60/40 split rear seats fold down to give a flat cargo area but only a space-saver spare tyre is supplied.

In the VTi-L you'll get a 7-inch touch control screen, keyless entry and start, reversing camera, Bluetooth, steering adjustable reach and rake, front and rear park assist, climate control air, rain-sensing wipers, heated seats, hill-start assist and a panoramic sunroof.

The verdict

The HR-V had impressive features, such as the blind spot display camera, but the boot space would be a major issue for us.

On coarse roads our tester found the ride becomes less smooth and road noise enters the cabin. Otherwise, the HR-V is an economical and reasonable performer for its size. ■



Nutshell

- We test the Handpresso Wild Hybrid and Lavazza A Modo Mio Espressgo coffee makers.
- The Handpresso disappointed; the Espressgo did not.

Chris Barnes sees whether these handheld machines can deliver a decent espresso

Are you a regular long-distance traveller, four-wheel-driver, truckie or some other breed of road warrior? And do you often find yourself craving a good coffee when far away from any decent coffee shops? Then a portable espresso maker may appeal. We put two through their paces.

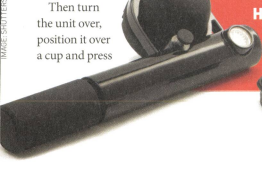
Handpresso Wild Hybrid

This gadget needs no power supply and can use either ground coffee or E.S.E. (Easy Serving Espresso) pods, which can be purchased online or in some stores. The operation varies depending on which you use, but the principle is the same and the instructions are easy to follow. Pump the device up to 16 bars of pressure (the green zone on the gauge). Add 50mL of freshly boiled water to the tank, put in the pod or coffee using the appropriate adapter and screw the water tank in.

Then turn the unit over, position it over a cup and press the infusion button. The pressurised air forces the water through the coffee and into the cup.

Unfortunately, the coffee it makes is very weak, even when using top-quality freshly ground beans. Coffee from the pods is no better. What little crema it produces is bubbly and vanishes rapidly. The coffee tastes watery, with pretty poor flavour and aftertaste. You may improve it with practice, but anyone used to good espresso is likely to be disappointed in the Handpresso.

Depending on your options for boiling water, you'll likely find better coffee from other types of coffee maker – such as a Bialetti-style stovetop espresso pot, a coffee plunger, or even a traditional briki for Greek or Turkish coffee – and at a much lower price than the Handpresso. However, these don't take E.S.E. pods, so if they're your preference, the Handpresso may be worth a look.



HANDPRESSO WILD HYBRID
PRICE $153
CONTACT clean-machine.com.au
★★★★★

LAVAZZA A MODO MIO ESPRESSGO
PRICE $199
CONTACT lavazza.com.au
★★★★★

Lavazza A Modo Mio Espressgo

The Espressgo has a water container with a heating element powered by the vehicle's 12V socket (a.k.a. the cigarette lighter).

Top make a coffee, pour 50mL of cold water from the supplied espresso cup into the water container. Place a Lavazza A Modo Mio capsule in the capsule holder, close it onto the base, plug in the machine and turn it on. When the machine beeps and the gauge shows that the temperature is right, unplug the unit, turn it upside down and press the button to release the coffee into the cup. The whole operation is easy and takes about three minutes.

The espresso is pleasant enough, though not up to the standard of a good home espresso machine or coffee-shop barista. And like the Handpresso, the Espressgo won't heat or froth milk, so latte and cappuccino fans might need to look elsewhere.

While the Espressgo might not excite a discerning coffee drinker, it's a decent option when you're on the road and craving a quality caffeine hit. ■

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

Next month, you'll receive your special Shonkys edition of CHOICE magazine.

To give you all the juice on this year's lemons, we're holding back delivery to bring you the winners.

SHONKYS 2015

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IMAGE: GETTY/ISTOCK

USING THE INDEX Bold type indicates a product test, member survey or user trial report. Normal type indicates a CHOICE research report. *Indicates a correction or clarification.

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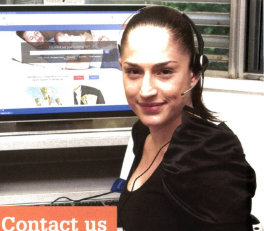

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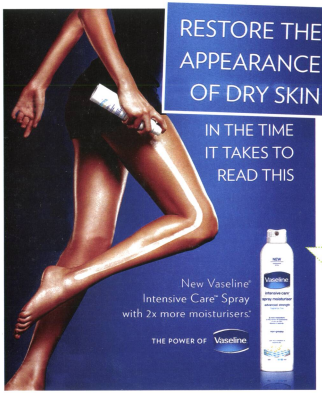
Rough treatment

Really, who wants to "restore the appearance of dry skin"? We think Vaseline needs a smoother sales pitch.


RESTORE THE APPEARANCE OF DRY SKIN
IN THE TIME IT TAKES TO READ THIS
New Vaseline® Intensive Care™ Spray with 2x more moisturisers*
THE POWER OF Vaseline

HARD WORD

Thanks this month go to Greig Sheridan, Wendy Perry, Myles Penfold-Smith and Hana Maxwell. If you have any examples you'd like to share with other CHOICE members, send them with your full name to The Hard Word, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.

Compiled by Siobahn Donohoe

KINDA SWEET...

Glancing at her cereal box over breakfast, Hard Word contributor Hana was a little bee-mused by Sanitarium's "serving suggestion" of a bee in her cereal.

Don't measure up?

Problem: you're a 6'1" man, concerned you're not towering manfully enough over the lady in your life. **Solution**: these elevator shoes. Or perhaps it's an ego boost you need?